Connective Mobility, Contentious Crossings : A History of the Baghdad-Damascus Route, 1923-1939

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César Jaquier. Connective Mobility, Contentious Crossings : A History of the Baghdad-Damascus Route, 1923-1939. History. Université Lumière - Lyon II; Université de Neuchâtel (Neuchâtel, Suisse), 2022. English. ⟨NNT : 2022LYO20006⟩. ⟨tel-04042870⟩

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N° d'ordre NNT : 2022LYO20006

THÈSE de DOCTORAT DE L'UNIVERSITÉ LUMIÈRE LYON 2
en COTUTELLE avec L'UNIVERSITÉ DE NEUCHÂTEL

École Doctorale : ED 483 Sciences sociales

Discipline : Histoire

Soutenue publiquement le 26 septembre 2022, par :

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Connective Mobility, Contentious Crossings.

A History of the Baghdad-Damascus Route, 1923-1939.

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Université Lumière Lyon 2

École Doctorale ED 483 Sciences Sociales

Laboratoire de Recherche Historique Rhône-Alpes (UMR 5190)

Université de Neuchâtel

Faculté des lettres et sciences humaines

Institut d'histoire

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in History/Humanities and Social Sciences

Presented and defended on 26 September 2022

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Connective Mobility, Contentious Crossings: A History of the Baghdad–Damascus Route, 1923–1939

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Abstract/Résumé

Title: Connective Mobility, Contentious Crossings: A History of the Baghdad–Damascus Route, 1923–1939

Keywords: mobility/mobilities; transportation; infrastructure; borders and borderlands; space; territory; imperialism; pilgrimage; tourism; migration; The League of Nations; Lebanon; Syria; Iraq; Middle East history; transnational and transimperial history; environmental history

Abstract: In the aftermath of the First World War, a new route developed between Damascus and Baghdad through the Syrian Desert, driven by the development of motorised transport services and the increasing movement of people, goods and mail between the two cities. This transdesert route linked regions of the former Ottoman Empire that witnessed the formation of separate territorial states in the interwar period. It also connected French and British zones of influence. This dissertation explores the interactions between mobility, space and states in the post-Ottoman Middle East by presenting a history of the Baghdad–Damascus route in the 1920s and 1930s. It first explores the development of this route from 1923 onwards, examining pre-existing forms of transdesert mobility, the development of a new transport system and its impact on mobility. In doing so, it shows that the route was shaped by multiple human, technological and environmental factors. The dissertation demonstrates that transdesert mobility accelerated, intensified and diversified, but that these trends did not unfold evenly and consistently. The movements of people, goods and commodities were subject to significant obstacles, dangers and restrictions.

The dissertation then investigates how the development of the Baghdad–Damascus route generated interactions between actors having convergent and divergent interests. It shows that the route became an arena of conflict, compromise and cooperation where local, national, international and imperial actors intersected. Finally, the dissertation examines the impact of transdesert mobility on the spatial and territorial reconfiguration of the regions bordering the Syrian Desert. It argues that transdesert mobility played a major role in the formation and consolidation of the states of Iraq and Syria and their border, while contributing to the emergence of a regional space transcending borders, as well as to the integration of this Syrian-Iraqi space into transregional mobility networks.

Ultimately, this dissertation suggests that the development of the Baghdad–Damascus route revealed and accentuated a series of tensions: a) between mobility and immobility; b) between non-state actors and post-Ottoman states; and c) between the formation of territorial states and processes of regional and global integration. This dissertation aims to show the multiple effects that the development of the Baghdad–Damascus route has had on mobility, space and states, as well as on the actors involved, generating both concord and conflict, cooperation and competition, integration and division.

Titre en français : Mobilité, frontière et espace: Une histoire de la route Bagdad-Damas, 1923-1939

Mots clefs : mobilité/mobilités ; transport ; infrastructure ; frontières et zones frontières ; espace ; territoire ; impérialisme ; pèlerinage ; tourisme ; migration ; Société des Nations ; Liban ; Syrie ; Irak ; Moyen-Orient ; histoire transnationale et transimpériale ; histoire environnementale.

Résumé : Au lendemain de la Première Guerre mondiale, une nouvelle route se développe entre Damas et Bagdad à travers le Désert de Syrie, à la faveur du développement de services de transport motorisé. Cette route relie des régions de l'ancien Empire ottoman au sein desquelles se forment des États territoriaux distincts durant l'entre-deux-guerres. Elle connecte également les zones d'influence française et britannique. Cette thèse explore les interactions entre mobilité, espace et États dans le Moyen-Orient post-ottoman en présentant une histoire de la route Bagdad-Damas au cours des années 1920 et 1930. Il s'agit tout d'abord d'explorer le développement de cette route à partir de 1923, en examinant les formes préexistantes de mobilité transdésertique, le développement d'un nouveau système de transport et ses conséquences sur la mobilité. La thèse souligne l'influence combinée de multiples facteurs humains, technologiques et environnementaux dans ce processus. Ce faisant, elle démontre que la mobilité transdésertique s'accélère, s'intensifie et se diversifie, sans pour autant que ces tendances ne se manifestent de manière égale et uniforme. La circulation des personnes, des biens et des marchandises reste soumise à de nombreux obstacles, dangers et restrictions.

Cette thèse explore ensuite comment le développement de la route Bagdad–Damas donne lieu à des interactions entre des acteurs aux intérêts convergents et divergents. Le nouvel itinéraire transdésertique suscite des conflits, des compromis et des formes de coopération entre acteurs locaux, nationaux, internationaux et impériaux. Enfin, il s'agit d'examiner les implications de la mobilité transdésertique sur l'organisation spatiale et territoriale des régions limitrophes du

Désert de Syrie. La thèse soutient que la mobilité transdésertique joue un rôle majeur dans la formation et la consolidation des États de Syrie et d'Irak et de leur frontière, tout en contribuant à l'émergence d'un espace régional chevauchant les frontières, ainsi qu'à l'intégration de cet espace syro-irakien dans des réseaux de mobilité transrégionaux.

En somme, cette thèse démontre que le développement de la route Bagdad-Damas révèle et accentue une série de tensions : a) entre mobilité et immobilité ; b) entre des acteurs non étatiques et les États mandataires ; c) entre la formation d'États territoriaux et les processus d'intégration régionale et mondiale. Cette thèse entend ainsi montrer les effets multiples que le développement de la route Bagdad-Damas a eu sur la mobilité, l'espace et les États, ainsi que sur les acteurs impliqués, générant à la fois concorde et conflit, coopération et compétition, intégration et division.

Acknowledgements

There are many people to whom I am grateful for supporting me during my doctoral studies, and making this research project a truly collective endeavour and experience.

First and foremost, I would like to thank my research supervisors. This project would not have been possible without the support and encouragement from Jordi Tejel, who has been there ever since I started thinking about it. Jordi, thank you so much for your guidance and helpful comments on every draft of my work. Our discussions have always taken me one step further towards my goal. I am also very grateful to you for always keeping your office door open (literally) to respond to my most humble questions and assuage my biggest doubts. This journey could also not have been possible without the guidance of Sylvia Chiffoleau, who agreed to become my second supervisor. Her invaluable advice, encouragement and suggestions provide for new avenues of research. I feel deeply indebted to your insightful feedback on my writing, Sylvia, which often made me understand what I had intended to express.

This research project was made possible by generous funding from the European Research Council. I have been able to conduct this research across many locations in Switzerland, France, the UK and Lebanon, thanks to the ERC.

It has been a wonderful and inspiring experience to be part of the BORDER research project team in Neuchâtel. Many thanks to Laura Stocker, Victoria Abrahamyan, Ramazan Hakkı Öztan and Jordi Tejel who made this project a collaborative venture from the beginning. Going on research trips together, sharing a desk, archival documents, ideas and meals with this team has made this adventure most enjoyable. It has also been a splendid experience to be part of the LARHRA at the University of Lyon, which almost made me forget the administrative headaches of setting up this joint supervision (‘cotutelle’). A big thanks to Nicolas Broisin, Perrine Camus-Joyet, Camille Cordier, Irène Gimenez, Elsa Neuville and all the others for bringing me into another collective of fellow researchers and friends.

Thanks to all the academics who have helped me get to this point, inspiring me with their work, giving me reading and research tips, or sharing archival material: Reem Bailony, Alexander Balistreri, Sophie Glutz Von Blotzheim, Valeska Huber, Simon Jackson, Mikiya Koyagi, Daniel Meier, Damiano Matasci, Silvia Naef, Norig Neveu, Philippe Pétriat, Michael Provence, Mehdi Sakatni, Cyrus Schayegh, Aline Schlaepfer and Peter Wien.

I would like to thank my colleagues and friends who have supported me throughout this project, provided me with valuable advice and proof-read part of this work: Marie-Laure

Archambault-Küch, Amandine Cabrio, Coraline Gajo, Julien Gressot, Catherine Herr-Laporte, Benedetta Serapioni and Mathilde Sigalas. Thanks also to all my friends who supported me along the way and made me laugh, dance, eat and have a good time outside academia: Elodie Blomet, Aicha Bouslama, Miriam Burnand, Gioia Cacchioli, Lorraine Chok, William Courbat, Léa Dassonville, Jehanne Denogent, Romain Desarzens, Pauline Doyen, Mélanie Fues, Yann Hakam, Claire Henry, Julia Huguenin-Dumittan, Nina Khamsy, Emma Larribeau, Maxime Mailhot, Kiri Santer, Vlad Sanz, Julia Torino, Florence Winteler, Anne Wuerzer and Corinne Zajaczkowski.

This project would not have been possible without the assistance of many archivists and librarians. I am particularly grateful to Paul Smith for his advice and the stimulating discussion we had at the Thomas Cook Archives in Peterborough. I also warmly thank Radhika Johari for proofreading and editing the chapters of this dissertation; your careful reading was a great help to me.

I also wish to express my thanks to the late Lokman Slim for all those moments of fascinating and moving discussions we had when I was an intern at UMAM Documentation & Research in Beirut. I will always remember your bright eyes and intelligent mind.

Thanks to my family: my brother Roméo, my parents Pascale and Stéphane, who gave me their love and inspired me to explore this world and try to understand it better.

Clément, I am so grateful to you for supporting me: putting up with my gloomy mood these past few weeks, making me laugh through the best and hardest of times, taking me on getaways when we needed it, mimicking the old historian professor to mock me tenderly. It is our sense of humour that always gets us through the rough patches.

Geneva, 30 June 2022

Translation and Transliteration:

All translations are mine, unless otherwise stated. For French quotations, I have chosen to include the English translation directly in the text when the quotation is short, but to keep the original French in the text when the quotation is long and indented. In both cases, the original French or the English translation is indicated in the footnotes.

The transliteration of Arabic follows the standards of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. Names of people are spelled according to the IJMES transliteration system (without diacritics, but with *'ayn* and *hamza*). In the case of well-known personalities, I have used the established English-language spellings. The same applies to names of places. In the case of transport companies, I have opted, as far as possible, for the spelling chosen by the actors themselves. For example, I have spelt Kawatly, Tawil & Co., as it appears on the company letters, not Qawatli, Tawil & Co. Thus, the format may vary: for example, Debosh & Akkash, not Debosh, Akkash & Co. Where several spellings appear in company documents, I have chosen one version and sometimes adapted the spelling to IJMES's transliteration model.

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List of Abbreviations

AR	Auto-Routière du Levant Company
AUB	American University of Beirut
BANP	Bozanti–Alep–Nissibine et prolongements Company
BBTA	Beyrouth–Bagdad–Téhéran Automobiles Company
CB	Contrôle Bédouin
DHP	Damas–Hama et prolongements Company
OIHP	Office International d'Hygiène Publique
PWD	Public Works Department
SGSO	Société Générale Française d'Entreprises et de Travaux Publics–Section Orient

Introduction

The History of a Route

> Lorsque, avant la guerre, on regardait la carte allemande de Kiepert dont se servait alors la diplomatie pour délimiter les 'zones d'influence' des puissances dans l'empire ottoman et le tracé des nouveaux chemins de fer, on pouvait voir, à travers le désert de Syrie, cette mention: Damas–Bagdad, 29 jours. Je viens de faire ce trajet en 26 heures.[1]

With these words, the Swiss journalist William Martin wrote in the *Journal de Genève* of 20 November 1929 about the journey he had just made from Damascus to Baghdad through the Syrian Desert. The map he referred to was most likely the 1884 map of the German geographer Henrich Kiepert showing the 'Asian provinces' of the Ottoman Empire.[2] In the lower centre of this map (Figure 1), just above the legend, appears the Syrian Desert (*Bādiyyat al-Shām*), whose steppe and desert lands extend west to the Orontes Valley, east to the Euphrates, south into the Arabian Desert, and north gradually turn into more fertile lands.[3] It was across this desert area that William Martin travelled in 1929, at a time when the Syrian Desert was no longer surrounded by Ottoman provinces, but by the emerging states of Syria and Iraq. He began his article by noting that the crossing of the desert was much faster than before the First World War: only 26 hours, instead of a month when the journey was made on pack animals, alongside trade caravans. He himself crossed the desert in an eight-wheeled bus operated by a company that provided a regular transport service between Damascus and Baghdad. The journey took him across 700–800 km of desert, interspersed with stops in the open air for a snack and a break at the military post and hotel of Rutbah midway. But he also crossed the Syrian–Iraqi border, passing through various checkpoints that marked the passage between two territorial states, placed under the respective trusteeship of France and Britain by the League of Nations in the aftermath of the war.[4] After a few days in Baghdad visiting the

[1] Le Temps Archives, William Martin, 'La traversée du désert', *Journal de Genève*, 20 November 1929, pp. 1–2. https://www.letempsarchives.ch/page/JDG_1929_11_20/1 (accessed 5 June 2022). Translation: 'When, before the war, one looked at the German map by Kiepert, which was then used by diplomats to delimit the 'zones of influence' of the powers in the Ottoman Empire and the route of the new railways, one could see, across the Syrian Desert, this mention: Damascus–Baghdad, 29 days. I have just made this journey in 26 hours.'

[2] Henrich Kiepert was famous for the maps of the Ottoman Empire he produced in the second half of the nineteenth century, and which were well known to European travellers. Ségolène Débarre, 'L'Asie Mineure des géographes allemands au milieu du XIXe siècle: le projet scientifique de Carl Ritter', *Chronos* No. 17 (2020), pp. 125–144.

[3] Library of Congress, Heinrich Kiepert, *Nouvelle carte générale des provinces asiatiques de L'empire Ottoman: sans L'Arabie* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1884) www.loc.gov/item/2013593036 (accessed 5 June 2022).

[4] In 1919, the newly created League of Nations provided in its Covenant that the populations of the former Ottoman Arab provinces should be placed under the trusteeship of 'advanced nations'. The San Remo Conference of April

city and its surroundings, William Martin set off in the opposite direction, crossing the Syrian Desert towards the Mediterranean to visit Palestine and then return to Europe.[5]

FIGURE 1: MAP OF THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE BY HENRICH KIEPERT

Image credit: Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division. Henrich Kiepert (1818–1899), "Nouvelle carte générale des provinces asiatiques de L'empire Ottoman: sans L'Arabie" (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1884).

The route taken by this journalist from Damascus to Baghdad and back was a well-trodden route through the Syrian Desert in the late 1920s. Since 1923, transport entrepreneurs had been running weekly convoys of cars between Damascus and Baghdad in both directions, carrying passengers, mail and goods across the desert (Figure 2). This route connected regions of the former Ottoman Empire that were evolving into separate territorial states in the interwar period. It also linked the French and British imperial domains in the Middle East.

All in all, William Martin's travel account highlights several points that this dissertation aims to explore: first, the development of transdesert mobility during the interwar years and its transformation from the nineteenth century; second, the intersection between intensifying

1920 formalised the granting of the mandate over Iraq to Great Britain and the mandate over Lebanon and Syria to France, the latter only becoming effective in 1923. See League of Nations Archives [hereinafter: LON], R5738/50/12447/12447, Covenant of the League of Nations, Article 22(1). See also Nadine Méouchy and Peter Sluglett (eds.), *The British and French Mandates in Comparative Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 2014); Cyrus Schayegh and Andrew Arsan (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of the History of the Middle East Mandates* (London: Routledge, 2015).

[5] See William Martin's article on the British Mandate administration in Iraq: William Martin, 'Le gouvernement de l'Irak', *Journal de Genève*, 23 November 1929, p. 1. https://www.letempsarchives.ch/page/JDG_1929_11_23/1 (accessed 5 June 2022).

mobility and the formation of territorial states; and third, the interactions that transdesert movements wove across multiples spaces. In sum, this work presents a history of the Baghdad–Damascus route in the interwar period, which explores the interplay between mobility, space and states in the post-Ottoman Middle East.[6] To the best of my knowledge, this is the first comprehensive study of this route in the interwar years and of the mobility that developed along it. Two older books addressed the development of transdesert traffic but, despite their undeniable value, were mainly concerned with the initiatives of two entrepreneurs, Norman and Jerry Nairn.[7] Recently, the Baghdad–Damascus route has gained increasing attention from historians, but has so far received only scattered mentions in various studies.[8]

Before going any further, I shall give some background information into the origins of this project, which will shed light on the methodological approach of this dissertation. Originally, my intention was to articulate a history of the regions bordering the Syrian Desert through the prism of one form of transregional mobility—that of Muslim pilgrims travelling to Mecca—, with a view to examining how movements interacted with and shaped space and territory in the post-Ottoman Middle East.[9] As time went by, the reading of archival material arose my interest in the development of motorised transport across the Syrian Desert. This led

[6] I have opted to use the expression 'Baghdad–Damascus route' throughout this dissertation (rather than 'Damascus–Baghdad route'), although transdesert movements were equally intense in both directions during the interwar period.

[7] Christina Phelps Grant, *The Syrian Desert: Caravans Travel and Exploration* (London: A. & C. Black, 1937), pp. 261–293; John M. Munro, *The Nairn Way: Desert Bus to Baghdad* (New York: Caravan Books, 1980).

[8] For various studies that have mentioned transdesert traffic and roads, see Nile Green, 'Fordist Connections: The Automotive Integration of the United States and Iran', Comparative Studies in Society and History 58:2 (2016), pp. 290–321; Robert Blecher, 'Desert Medicine, Ethnography, and the Colonial Encounter in Mandatory Syria' in Nadine Méouchy and Peter Sluglett (eds.), *The British and the French Mandates in Comparative Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), pp. 249–268; James Canton, *From Cairo to Baghdad: British Travellers in Arabia* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), p. 92; Robert S. G. Fletcher, 'Running the Corridor: Nomadic Societies and Imperial Rule in the Inter-War Syrian Desert', *Past & Present* 220:1 (August 2013), p. 220; Timothy Kennett, 'Resurrecting Eden: Inaugural British Narration and Policy of Iraq' (MA thesis, The American University in Cairo, 2016), pp. 52–54; Philippe Pétriat, 'The Uneven Age of Speed: Caravans, Technology, and Mobility in the Late Ottoman and Post-Ottoman Middle East', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 53:2 (2021), pp. 273–290; Mehdi Sakatni, 'From Camel to Truck? Automobiles and the Pastoralist Nomadism of Syrian Tribes during the French Mandate (1920–46)', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 39:1 (2019), pp. 162–163; Cyrus Schayegh, *The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2017), pp. 128, 159, 173, 253–253.

[9] As will be developed further in this thesis, territory is understood here as a delimited political space in which an authority a) aspires to complete and exclusive control of that territory within well-defined boundaries and b) seeks to unify, map and organise that territory, particularly in order to extract resources from it. In contrast, I conceive of space as the product of social interactions (resulting in particular from mobilities), perceptions and imaginations, and organisational practices. Space is thus plural and constantly reshaped. On the concepts of territory and territoriality, see Charles S. Maier, 'Transformations of Territoriality, 1600-2000', in *Transnationale Geschichte: Themen, Tendenzen Und Theorien* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006), pp. 32–55; Charles S. Maier, 'Consigning the Twentieth Century to History: Alternative Narratives for the Modern Era', *The American Historical Review* 105:3 (January 2000), pp. 807–31. On the concept of space and the 'spatial turn', see Henri Lefebvre, *La Production de l'espace* (Paris: Anthropos, 1974 [English, 1991]); Doreen B. Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage, 2005), pp. 9–15.

me to consider investigating the growth of automobility between Iraq and Syria, with the purpose of combining the examination of movements and infrastructure. The intention was not to carry out research on technology; rather, the aim was to examine the social, economic, political and territorial dimensions of transdesert mobility, including its limits. By mobility, I mean both the possibilities of moving across the Syrian Desert and the multiple movements of people, goods and mail, considered in their collective dimension and their singular experiences.[10] As my project was fundamentally about studying the reshaping of post-Ottoman space through the lens of mobility, I have come to articulate the history of a route—that is, the intertwined history of a transport system, of multiple forms of mobility, and of spaces traversed, connected and transformed by these movements.[11] This perspective enables me to study the interactions between flows and structures, and to follow people whose movements did not necessarily adhere to territorial boundaries. It also makes it possible to examine closely the intersection of multiple forms of mobility and control in a place that was constantly reshaped by local, regional, imperial, international and transregional dynamics.[12]

[10] Tim Cresswell, *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World* (New York: Routledge, 2006); John Urry, *Mobilities* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007); Mathieu Flonneau and Vincent Guigueno (eds.), *De l'histoire des transports à l'histoire de la mobilité ?* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2009); Gijs Mom, Gordon Pirie and Laurent Tissot (eds.), *Mobility in History: The State of the Art in the History of Transport, Traffic and Mobility* (Neuchâtel: Alphil Presses universitaires suisses, 2009).

[11] This dissertation takes its cue from the following remarkable studies that examine the interplay between mobilities and transport infrastructure in a particular location: Valeska Huber, *Channelling Mobilities: Migration and Globalisation in the Suez Canal Region and Beyond, 1869-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Mikiya Koyagi *Iran in Motion: Mobility, Space, and the Trans-Iranian Railway* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021); Fulya Özkan, 'A Road in Rebellion: A History on the Move: The Social History of the Trabzon-Bayezid Road and the Formation of the Modern State in the Late Ottoman World' (PhD thesis, State University of New York at Binghamton, 2012).

[12] Here I draw on studies in global history that adopt a micro-historical perspective, notably by focusing on a specific place. Romain Bertrand and Guillaume Calafat, 'La microhistoire globale: affaire(s) à suivre', *Annales HSS* 73:1 (2018), pp. 3–18; Sebastian Conrad, *What is Global History?* (Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016), pp. 129–132; John-Paul A. Ghobrial, 'Introduction: Seeing the World like a Microhistorian', *Past & Present* No. 242, Suppl. 14 (2019), pp. 1–22; Matthias Middell and Katja Naumann, 'Global history and the spatial turn: from the impact of area studies to the study of critical junctures of globalization', *Journal of Global History* 5:1 (2010), pp. 149–170. On the reasons for studying a 'global locality', see also Valeska Huber, *Channelling Mobilities*, pp. 15, 30–31.

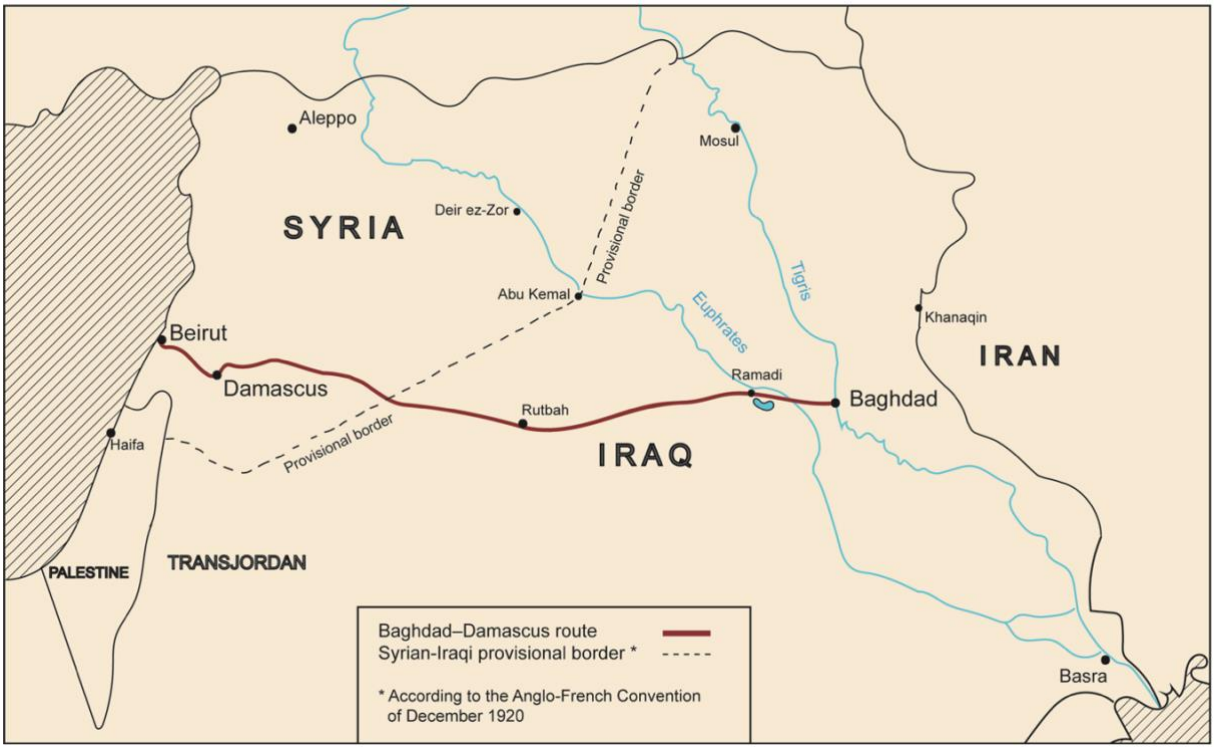

FIGURE 2: MAP OF THE BAGHDAD–DAMASCUS ROUTE

Image credit: Redrawn by the author from: *Maps of Iraq with Notes for Visitors* (Baghdad: Government of Iraq, 1929).

At its core, this dissertation investigates how the development of the Baghdad–Damascus route transformed the connectivity of the regions surrounding the Syrian Desert. A number of questions arise from this research agenda. How and to what extent did transdesert mobility change during the interwar period? Which actors tried and succeeded in taking advantage of the development of this new route and how did they interact with each other? Did the development of transdesert mobility reinforce or undermine the formation of territorial states? Related to this, did the Baghdad–Damascus route foster the integration of the post-Ottoman states and, more broadly, did it encourage a process of regional and transregional integration of the emerging national spaces? These questions guide the approach I take to the Baghdad–Damascus route, as outlined below.

Admittedly, the Syrian Desert was a space of circulation prior to the twentieth century. Long before the advent of motorised transport, the desert was crisscrossed by pastoral tribes migrating with the seasons, as well as by trade caravans and sometimes by travellers moving with them. In the nineteenth century, the caravans followed a variety of routes across the desert, which generally passed to the north of the direct route followed by William Martin in 1929. These pre-existing forms of mobility formed a background of transdesert connectivity.[13] The

[13] Transdesert mobility in the nineteenth century is discussed in the preliminary chapter (Chapter 0).

mobility of nomadic groups and caravans also persisted in the twentieth century.[14] Nonetheless, transdesert mobility was profoundly transformed in the interwar years. From 1923 onwards, cars and vans carried mail, passengers and luggage across the desert, as well as small but increasing amounts of goods, and the volume of traffic increased from about ten passengers per month in 1923 to a few thousands in the 1930s. Moreover, the duration of travel between Damascus and Baghdad decreased from several weeks in the late nineteenth century to 2 or 3 days in the mid-1920s when conditions allowed. Accordingly, this dissertation sets out to investigate the transformations in the speed, scale and nature of transdesert mobility that occurred during the interwar years.

This period was described by many contemporary observers as the 'age of speed'.[15] Historians have also taken up this expression. Recently, a special issue on automobility in the Middle East referred to the changes brought about by the development of motorised transport in the twentieth century as the 'age of speed'.[16] However, speed alone does not capture the transformations of transdesert mobility in the interwar period. In the late 1920s, for example, it was possible to cross the desert in two days, but convoys were only allowed to travel twice a week. Throughout the interwar years, moreover, the two-day crossing could only be made in dry weather, as rains turned the desert into mud. These observations call for an examination of the factors that promoted and hindered the development of transdesert mobility.

For most of the interwar period, the Baghdad–Damascus route was not a paved road, but a path through the desert that cars followed approximately. The desert journey required careful preparation. Before departure, the vehicles were loaded in Damascus and Baghdad with enough water, food and fuel to last for several days; and luggage was tied to the roof and sides of the cars, sometimes in a van that followed them. Once the preparations were complete, the

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[14] On caravan trade in the interwar period, see Philippe Pétriat, 'The Uneven Age of Speed', pp. 273–290. On nomadism and the adaptation of Bedouin societies to the historical developments of the early twentieth century, see Robert S. G. Fletcher, *British Imperialism and 'The Tribal Question': Desert Administration and Nomadic Societies in the Middle East, 1919-1936* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Mehdi Sakatni, 'From Camel to Truck?', pp. 159–169; Laura Stocker, 'The 'Camel Dispute': Cross-border Mobility and Tribal Conflicts in the Iraqi-Syrian Borderland, 1929-1934', in Jordi Tejel and Ramazan Hakkı Öztan (eds.), *Regimes of Mobility: Borders and State Formation in the Middle East, 1918-1946* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), pp. 319–350.

[15] As On Barak has pointed out, the term was widely used in English, French and Arabic writings in the early decades of the twentieth century. In Egypt, the 'age of speed' (*'aṣr al-sur'a*) referred to the profound transformations brought about by technological developments. On Barak, *On Time: Technology and Temporality in Modern Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), pp. 145–146.

[16] Simon Jackson, 'Introduction: The Global Middle East in the Age of Speed: From Joyriding to Jamming, and from Racing to Raiding', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 39:1 (2019), pp. 111–115. Since then, the expression has been taken up again and interrogated by other historians too. Nile Green, 'New Histories for the Age of Speed: The Archaeological–Architectural Past in Interwar Afghanistan and Iran', *Iranian Studies* 54:3–4 (2021), pp. 349–397; Philippe Pétriat, 'The Uneven Age of Speed'.

transport contractors formed a convoy of cars that left together according to a set schedule. From west to east, the cars departed from Damascus early in the morning and drove through the surrounding cultivated areas, before branching off into the desert—not a desert of sand, but of hard, gravelly soil, with occasional hills and *wadis*. They followed the tracks left on the ground by the previous cars, which sometimes extended over several kilometres in width. Halfway along the route, the fortified post of Rutbah offered a safe place for travellers to stop for an hour or for the night.

As can be seen, transdesert mobility did not rely on an infrastructure as materially significant as that of the Baghdad Railway and the Suez Canal; it did, however, rest on a particular transport system that enabled the movement of cars, passengers and commodities across the desert. Their movements were also governed by traffic rules and depended on the transport business. A study of these different aspects of the Baghdad–Damascus route can shed valuable insight into the intensification of transdesert mobility, but also into its limits. This dissertation suggests that the formation of the Baghdad–Damascus route cannot be translated into a simple narrative of technological mastery (of nature) and human rationality.[17] Rather, it posits that a multiplicity of historical agents shaped the transport system, promoting, disrupting or hindering transdesert mobility. Based on this premise, the dissertation will explore the favourable and adverse effects on transdesert mobility of automotive technology, transport entrepreneurs, state officials and administrators, individuals and groups present in the Syrian Desert, as well as the environmental dispositions of this area.

Transdesert mobility was also practised, encouraged and marketed by many people. This dissertation asks whether the Baghdad–Damascus route gave rise to new practices of travel and trade across the Syrian Desert. An examination of the business of transport and travel can highlight certain dynamics influencing transport services and fares, as well as the actors who sought to advertise travel across Syria and Iraq. Furthermore, attention to the travellers themselves will shed light on the motivations and experiences of individuals. In other words, this dissertation investigates a possible diversification of the forms of transdesert mobility during the interwar period. It remains to be seen whether certain individuals and groups were

[17] For critiques of technological determinism, see for example David Edgerton, *The Shock of the Old: Technology and global history since 1900* (London: Profile Books, 2006); Thomas J. Misa, *Leonardo to the Internet: Technology & Culture from the Renaissance to the Present*, 2nd edition (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), pp. 299–319; Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). On the prevalent discourse of the mastery of nature by technology during the interwar period, see Katrin Bromber et al., '"The possibilities are endless": progress and the taming of contingency', *ZMO Programmatic texts* No. 9 (2015), p. 6; Jacob Krais, 'Mastering the Wheel of Chance: Motor Racing in French Algeria and Italian Libya,' *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 39:1 (2019), p. 152.

prevented from travelling. In fact, the journey through the desert involved crossing the Syrian–Iraqi border. The cross-border dimension of transdesert mobility thus brings up several questions. To what extent did the formation of territorial states and borders affect transdesert mobility? Did the practices and norms governing the regulation of mobility impact all forms of travel in the same way? What was the attitude of the two French and British Mandate powers towards mobility? By addressing these questions, this dissertation aims to provide an overview of transdesert mobility that accounts for political barriers to movement and the differential access to mobility.

As the above discussion suggests, the Baghdad–Damascus route attracted the attention of many different actors. This raises the question of whether the interests of Mandate powers, local governments, transport entrepreneurs, the nomadic groups migrating through the Syrian Desert, and so on, converged or diverged. The relationship between states and non-state actors provides a useful avenue to explore, as it may shed light on the workings of the Mandate states and the capacities of local people to assert their own interests. Accordingly, this dissertation aims to explore the interactions, collaborations and conflicts between these multiple actors. It also examines how the Baghdad–Damascus route connected the states of Lebanon, Syria and Iraq. Did the development of this route bind the French and British powers together or did it stir up rivalries? To what extent did it intertwine the policies of the post-Ottoman states? The answers to these questions will provide another perspective on the transformations of transdesert connectivity.

Besides studying the shifts in mobility across the Syrian Desert, and the ways in which the development of the Baghdad–Damascus route caused the Mandate states to interact with each other and with non-state actors, this dissertation examines the consequences of transdesert mobility on the regions bordering the Syrian Desert. It examines, firstly, Darshan Vigneswaran and Joel Quirk's argument that 'mobility makes states', not just the other way around.[18] Indeed, one may ask whether the movement of people and goods across the Syrian Desert had an impact on the states' policies, on the distribution of state power across space, and on the formation of the Syrian–Iraqi border. By exploring the possibility of mutual influence between states and mobility, the dissertation aims to contribute to a better understanding of the transition between the Ottoman Empire and the post-Ottoman states.

[18] Darshan Vigneswaran and Joel Quirk, 'Mobility Makes States' in Darshan Vigneswaran and Joel Quirk (eds.), *Mobility Makes States: Migration and Power in Africa* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), pp. 1–34.

The focus on the Baghdad–Damascus route, secondly, offers the opportunity to move beyond the simple discussion of the interplay between states and mobility, which tends to maintain a binary view dividing between 'inside' and 'outside'; by contrast, it makes it possible to look at how mobility interacted with actors and dynamics at multiple scales.[19] As such, the dissertation questions whether the movement of people and goods across the borders of the post-Ottoman states forged geographies and 'identities that straddled those borders'.[20] In other words, the aim is to examine to what extent transdesert mobility created economic, social and cultural interactions that transcended territorial borders and gave shape to a Syrian–Iraqi regional space. How did the inhabitants of the regions bordering the Syrian Desert—the Lebanese, the Syrians, the Iraqis and others—conceive of the journey through the desert? Through their movements, how did they develop new spatial representations and weave interactions on a regional scale? In answering these questions, the dissertation will interrogate the permeability of national and regional spaces and the interactions between processes of regionalisation and state territorialisation. At the same time, the development of the Baghdad–Damascus route did not only set Arab travellers in motion, as the story of the journalist William Martin points out. As such, an examination of the connectivity of the regions surrounding the Syrian Desert involves exploring how the Baghdad–Damascus route was incorporated into transport and mobility networks extending far beyond these two cities into Europe, Central and South Asia, and the Arabian Peninsula. In doing so, this dissertation seeks to better qualify the changing connectivity of the regions bordering the Syrian Desert and, thereby, to interrogate the emergence of a post-Ottoman Middle Eastern space in the interwar period.

The observations and research questions outlined above invite a closer look at the historical context in which the Damascus–Baghdad route took shape, so as to highlight the potential interactions between transdesert mobility and the formation of imperial and national spaces.

The Interwar Middle East

The interwar period was a time of transition, marked as much by continuities and discontinuities with the late Ottoman period.[21] In the early twentieth century, a series of

[19] On the pitfalls of perspectives focused on the polarities of inside/outside, see the reference to John Agnew in Speranta Dumitru, 'Qu'est-ce que le nationalisme méthodologique ? Essai de typologie', *Raisons politiques* 54:2 (2014), p. 14.
[20] Toufoul Abou-Hodeib, 'Involuntary History: Writing Levantines into the Nation' *Contemporary Levant* 5:1 (2020), p. 48.
[21] James L. Gelvin, *The Modern Middle East: A History* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 319–322; James L. Gelvin, 'Was there a Mandates period? Some concluding thoughts', in Cyrus Schayegh and

historical developments profoundly transformed the political, social and economic organisation of the regions surrounding the Syrian Desert, constituting what Simon Jackson has called 'late imperial ruptures'.[22] French and British imperial expansion into the former Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire, the establishment of the League of Nations and the Mandate system, as well as the formation of territorial states—these developments placed Damascus and Baghdad into two distinct territorial and Mandate spaces.

An imperial crossroads

By the end of the First World War, French and British armies occupied all the former Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire.[23] The regions surrounding the Syrian Desert were thus integrated into the French and British imperial domains.[24] In fact, the imperial expansion of the two powers into this part of the world was linked to a century-long history of trying to establish and control commercial routes between Europe and South Asia. Between the late eighteenth century and the early decades of the nineteenth century, the British attempted to forge a trade route across the Mediterranean, Egypt and the Red Sea, as the pre-existing Cape route proved unable to meet the growing needs of the trade between London and Bombay or Calcutta. Meanwhile, the invasion of Egypt by Napoleon Bonaparte's troops in 1798 and later of parts of the Eastern Mediterranean drew British attention to the caravan route that crossed the Syrian Desert and Mesopotamia to the Persian Gulf. The Syrian Desert route was considered more concretely in the 1830s when Captain Francis R. Chesney explored the possibility of navigating the Tigris and the Euphrates with steamships. Besides economic reasons, the British saw the development of the overland route through Mesopotamia as a means of counteracting Russian

Andrew Arsan (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of the History of the Middle East Mandates*, pp. 425–429; Thomas Philipp and Christoph Schumann (eds.), *From the Syrian Land to the States of Syria and Lebanon* (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2004), pp. 9–94; Cyrus Schayegh and Andrew Arsan (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook*, pp. 1–23; Jordi Tejel, 'The Monarchist Era Revisited', in Jordi Tejel, Riccardo Bocco, et al. (eds.), *Writing the Modern History of Iraq: Historiographical and Political Challenges* (Singapore/London: World Scientific, 2012), pp. 87–94.

[22] Simon Jackson, 'From Beirut to Berlin (via Geneva): The New International History, Middle East Studies and the League of Nations', *Contemporary European History* 27:4 (2018), p. 726.

[23] On wartime developments, see Anne-Lucie Chaigne-Oudin, *La France et les rivalités occidentales au Levant: Syrie-Liban 1918-1939* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2006), pp. 31–60; Philip S. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920-1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 33–43; Jean-David Mizrahi, *Genèse de l'Etat mandataire: Service des Renseignements et bandes armées en Syrie et au Liban dans les années 1920* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2003), pp. 28–33; Eugene Rogan, *The Fall of the Ottomans: The Great War in the Middle East* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), pp. 217–274, 311–353; Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press , 2007), pp. 31–32. See also F.W. Leland, *With The M.T. In Mesopotamia* (Uckfield: The Naval and Military Press, 2004).

[24] Here I follow Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper who consider empires as 'large political units, expansionist or with a memory of power extended over space, polities that maintain distinction and hierarchy as they incorporate new people.' Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), p. 8.

imperial ambitions. Chesney's 1835 expedition did not prove successful, however. Merchant ships continued to use the Red Sea route, which became even more prominent in the mid-1850s, when railway lines were built between Suez, Cairo and Alexandria. In 1869, the opening of the Suez Canal definitely established the prevalence of the Red Sea route between the Mediterranean and India. Nonetheless, the Syrian Desert region did not lose its appeal to the British in the decades leading up to the First World War. A railway project was even launched in the 1880s to link the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf—a project that would only materialise much later in the form of the German-sponsored Baghdad Railway.[25]

Explorations across the Syrian Desert, Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf in the nineteenth century to find an alternative route between Europe and South Asia helped to shape new perceptions of space in British circles. As Guillemette Crouzet has demonstrated, the various projects supported by the Indian presidencies and then by the British government of India served to establish this region stretching from Mesopotamia to the Gulf as central to the British in India. In the course of the nineteenth century, the Persian Gulf and its surroundings ceased to be considered a marginal area by the British and became of crucial importance to their empire. Ultimately, Guillemette Crouzet has argued that before the term 'Middle East' was coined by the U.S. military historian Alfred T. Mahan and the British journalist Valentine Chirol in the early twentieth century, this ill-defined region centred on the Persian Gulf, Mesopotamia and Persia had emerged in the spatial imagination of British administrators and merchants in Bombay, Calcutta and London.[26]

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[25] For a comprehensive and detailed analysis of the British plans supported by Bombay, Calcutta and London to develop a 'direct route' through Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf, see Guillemette Crouzet, *Genèses du Moyen-Orient: Le Golfe Persique à l'âge des impérialismes (vers 1800-vers 1914)*, Chapter 6. See also Harold Lancaster Hoskins, *British Routes to India* (Philadelphia: Longmans Green, 1928); John Perry, 'A Shared Sea: The Axes of French and British Imperialism in the Mediterranean, 1798–1914', in James R. Fichter (ed.), *British and French Colonialism in Africa, Asia and the Middle East: Connected Empires across the Eighteenth to the Twentieth Centuries* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 113–130. About the development of the 'Overland Route' through Egypt, see also On Barak, *On Time*, pp. 21–52; Anne-Lucie Chaigne-Oudin, *La France et les rivalités occidentales au Levant*, pé. 15–31. About the Suez Canal, see also Valeska Huber, *Channelling Mobilities*; Caroline Piquet, *Histoire du canal de Suez* (Paris: Perrin, 2009). About transdesert railway projects, see also Michael E. Bonine, 'The Introduction of Railroads in the Eastern Mediterranean: Economic and Social Impacts', in Thomas Philipp and Birgit Schäbler (eds.), *The Syrian Land: Processes of Integration and Fragmentation : Bilād Al-Shām from the 18th to the 20th Century* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1998), pp. 57–58; Peter H. Christensen, *Germany and the Ottoman Railways: Art, Empire, and Infrastructure*, (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2017), pp. 58–59.

[26] Guillemette Crouzet, *Genèses du Moyen-Orient*; Guillemette Crouzet, 'Les Britanniques et l'invention du Moyen-Orient : Essai sur des géographies plurielles', *Esprit* No. 5 (May 2016), pp. 31–46; Guillemette Crouzet, 'The British Empire in India, the Gulf pearl and the making of the Middle East', *Middle Eastern Studies* 55:6 (November 2019), pp. 864–878. For another study on the emergence of the idea of a 'Middle East' in British representations before the 1920s, see Daniel Foliard, *Dislocating the Orient: British Maps and the Making of the Middle East, 1854-1921* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

The First World War provided the British, but also the French, with an opportunity to gain a foothold in this region. Securing access to oil fields and trade routes between the Mediterranean and Asia was an obvious motivation for British expansion in the Ottoman Empire. During the war, the British built a railway from Egypt to Haifa, which was to become a regional transport hub and an outlet for goods arriving from the east. To this end, they made sure to retain control over a strip of land between the Mediterranean and Mesopotamia during wartime negotiations, which later became Transjordan.[27] As for the French, their economic interests in Lebanon and Syria have been relegated to the background by many historians, with the exception of the interest of French silk manufacturers.[28] For Peter Sluglett, the main force behind French expansion in the Eastern Mediterranean region 'was nationalism rather than capitalism'.[29] By contrast, Simon Jackson has offered a thorough reassessment of France's motives for gaining a foothold in Lebanon and Syria, exposing the scope of economic interests expressed not only by the Chambers of Commerce, but also by colonial lobbies such as the *Comité d'Asie Française* and government officials.[30] In 1919, the French Chambers of Commerce sent the Huvelin mission to Syria to collect data on agriculture, trade and industry in order to better determine and showcase French economic prospects in the region. Essentially, the Huvelin Mission saw Syria 'as a future commercial crossroads' which should be developed for the benefit of the Syrians and the French.[31]

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[27] Douglas Carruthers, 'The Great Desert Caravan Route, Aleppo to Basra', *The Geographical Journal* 52:3 (1918), 1p. 57. See also Robert S. G. Fletcher, *British Imperialism and 'The Tribal Question*', pp. 35–36; Aaron S. Klieman, 'Britain's War Aims in the Middle East in 1915', *Journal of Contemporary History* 3:3 (1968), pp. 237–251; Pierre-Jean Luizard, 'Le mandat britannique en Irak: une rencontre entre plusieurs projets politiques', in Nadine Méouchy and Peter Sluglett (eds.), *The British and French Mandates in Comparative Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), p. 366; Jacob Norris, *Land of Progress: Palestine in the Age of Colonial Development, 1905-1948* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 10–11, 99–138; Tariq M. Tell, *The Social and Economic Origins of Monarchy in Jordan* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 57; Hassan Thuillard, *La naissance du territoire de l'Irak: A l'origine d'un Etat-frontièr*e (Geneva: Graduate Institute Publications, 2012), pp. 18–31.

[28] See for instance, Vincent Cloarec, *La France et la question de Syrie (1914-1918)* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2002); Michael Provence, *The Last Ottoman Generation and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 60; Mohammed Ali Saleh, 'Introduction de partie. Les aspects économiques généraux de la relation mandataire France, Syrie et Liban, 1918-1946' in Nadine Méouchy (ed.), *France, Syrie et Liban, 1918-1946 : les ambiguïtés et les dynamiques de la relation mandataire* (Damas: Institut français d'études arabes de Damas, 2002), pp. 145–147. On the lobbying of the Lyon silk manufacturers, see Dominique Chevallier, 'Lyon et la Syrie en 1919: les bases d'une intervention', *Revue historique* No. 24 (1960), pp. 275–320 ; John F. Laffey, 'Roots of French Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century: The Case of Lyon', *French Historical Studies* 6:1 (1969), pp. 78–92; Michel Seurat, 'Le rôle de lyon dans l'installation du mandat français en Syrie: Intérêts économiques et culturels, luttes d'opinion (1915-1925)', *Bulletin d'études orientales* No. 31 (1979), pp. 129–165.

[29] Peter Sluglett, 'Les mandats/the mandates: Some reflections on the nature of the British presence in Iraq (1914-1932) and the French presence in Syria (1918—1946)', in Nadine Méouchy and Peter Sluglett (eds.), *The British and French Mandates in Comparative Perspectives*, p. 111.

[30] Simon Jackson, 'Mandatory Development: The Political Economy of the French Mandate in Syria and Lebanon, 1915–1939', (PhD thesis, New York University, 2009), pp. 39–197.

[31] Simon Jackson, '"What is Syria Worth?" The Huvelin Mission, Economic Expertise and the French Project in the Eastern Mediterranean, 1918-1922', *Monde(s)* 4:2 (2013), pp. 83–103, here: p. 99. The report of the Huvelin Mission noted that Syria's 'primary purpose [was] transit'. ('*Zone de passage, reliant des régions productrices ou*

In the wake of the war, then, the Syrian Desert was seen by France and Britain as a hub of actual and potential trade routes. The prospect of increased trade relations between Europe and Asia strengthened the French and British in maintaining the position they had acquired in the Eastern Mediterranean and Mesopotamia. Consideration of these imperial economic and strategic interests is essential for understanding the policy of the French and British Mandate states towards transdesert mobility in the 1920s and 1930s. France's and Britain's imperial interests required the preservation and development of certain regional and transregional flows; as such, both powers had a stake in mitigating the adverse effects of the formation of territorial states on pre-existing and new connections.[32]

The Mandate system in the Post-Ottoman Middle East

The progressive occupation of the Ottoman Arab provinces by French and British forces during the First World War was accompanied by negotiations and partition plans. Concluded in May 1916, the Sykes–Picot Agreement provided for the creation of French and British zones of direct rule and indirect influence, as well as a zone with international status, Palestine. Under the terms of the Agreement, the western coastal zone was to fall to France and the inland area around Damascus to an Arab administration. Indeed, following negotiations in 1915 and 1916 between McMahon, the British High Commissioner in Cairo, and Hussein, the Sharif of Mecca, the British had recognised the right to an Arab Kingdom, albeit with some reservations, in exchange for a revolt by Hussein's troops against the Ottomans. In the few years following the Sykes–Picot Agreement, however, the front lines shifted, and the geopolitical map of the region no longer bore resemblance to that of Agreement. In particular, British forces conquered Mosul and its surrounding area during the war. In September 1919, Britain accepted the French claim to the Syrian interior, while France agreed to concede Palestine and Mosul to the British. British forces withdrew from the Syrian lands in October 1919, leaving the way open for French troops to march on Faysal's Arab forces and take Damascus in July 1920.[33]

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consommatrices plus riches qu'elle, [la Syrie] a pour vocation essentielle le transit.') Paul Huvelin, 'Que vaut la Syrie ?', *L'Asie française*, No. 197 (1921), p. 32.

[32] This argument has been made by other historians. See for example Jordi Tejel and Ramazan Hakkı Öztan, 'Introduction', in Jordi Tejel and Ramazan Hakkı Öztan (eds.), *Regimes of Mobility and Middle Eastern Borderlands, 1918-1946* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2022), p. 5; Cyrus Schayegh, *The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World*, p. 157.

[33] Anne-Lucie Chaigne-Oudin, *La France et les rivalités occidentales au Levant: Syrie-Liban 1918-1939* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2006), pp. 32–39; Vincent Cloarec, *La France et la question de Syrie*, pp. 113–152; Pierre-Jean Luizard, 'Le mandat britannique en Irak', p. 365; Nadine Picaudou, *La décennie qui ébranla le Moyen-Orient* (Paris: Flammarion, 2017), pp. 111–162; Michael Provence, *The Last Ottoman Generation*, pp. 56–68. On the popular but mistaken view that the Sykes–Picot Agreement provided the foundation for the division of the Middle East into territorial states by the French and British colonial powers, see Sara Pursley, ''Lines Drawn on an Empty

Meanwhile, the settlement of the war at the Paris Peace Conference resulted in the creation of the League of Nations in 1919 and the establishment of a special regime to administer the populations of the former Ottoman provinces and German colonies. The Mandate system provided for these populations to be placed under the trusteeship of 'advanced nations' who would be responsible for their 'well-being and development' and, in the case of the Arab provinces of the former Ottoman Empire, for assisting them until they could become independent.[34] The principle of internationalising the status of the colonies was born out of the influence of internationalist discourse and the concept of self-determination advocated by U.S. President Wilson, but the negotiations behind the creation of the Mandate system were also influenced by the recent expansionist drive of France and Britain and their determination to annex new territories. Proponents of the Mandate system believed that it had the potential to transform and mitigate pre-war imperialism by bringing the territories seized during the war under the oversight of the League of Nations.[35] In the meantime, uprisings in Egypt in 1919 and Iraq in 1920 convinced British colonial administrators that outright territorial annexation would be too difficult to carry out. France and Britain, moreover, felt that their designation as Mandate powers by the League of Nations would give them legitimacy in the eyes of the international community, and so they accepted the Mandate system. In April 1920, the San Remo Conference entrusted the Middle East Mandates to France and Great Britain.[36]

Historians of the League of Nations and the modern Middle East have widely disputed whether and to what extent the Mandate system transformed pre-existing forms of colonial governance. In fact, the League of Nations' 'oversight mechanisms' were very limited.[37] The Permanent Mandates Commission (PMC) was responsible for examining the annual reports sent by the Mandate powers, but neither the PMC nor the Council of the League of Nations had

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Map': Iraq's Borders and the Legend of the Artificial State (Part 2)', *Jadaliyya*, 3 June 2015; Carl Bryant Shook, 'The Origins and Development of Iraq's National Boundaries', pp. 219–230; Matthieu Rey, 'Drawing a Line in the Sand? Another (Hi)Story of Borders', in Matthieu Cimino (ed.), *Syria: Borders, Boundaries, and the State* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020), pp. 27–28, 42.

[34] LON, R5738/50/12447/12447, Covenant of the League of Nations, Article 22(1).

[35] Toby Dodge, *Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation Building and a History Denied* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 12; James L. Gelvin, 'Was There a Mandates Period?', p. 426; Gérard D. Khoury, 'Introduction de partie. Les conditions d'instauration du Mandat français au Proche-Orient après la Première guerre mondiale', in Nadine Méouchy (ed.), *France, Syrie et Liban 1918-1946*, p. 52; Susan Pedersen, *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 2.

[36] Toby Dodge, 'International obligation, domestic pressure and colonial nationalism; the birth of the Iraqi state under the mandate system', in Nadine Méouchy and Peter Sluglett (eds.), *The British and French Mandates in Comparative Perspectives*, pp. 143–148; Pierre-Jean Luizard, 'Le mandat britannique en Irak', pp. 361–384; Susan Pedersen, *The Guardians*, pp. 1–44; Susan Pedersen, 'The Meaning of the Mandates System: An Argument', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 32:4 (December 2006), pp. 560–582; Cyrus Schayegh and Andrew Arsan (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook*, pp. 2–3.

[37] Quote: Susan Pedersen, 'The Meaning of the Mandates System', p. 568.

executive or punitive powers. In addition, France and Britain were themselves part of the League of Nations, which in some respects was therefore a 'League of Empires'.[38] Nor was the type of governance of the two powers much different in the Mandate states than in their colonies. The French and British Mandate authorities did not make much effort to build institutions that would prepare the transition to an independent government; they took all decisions on foreign affairs, defence and customs matters; and the High Commissioners retained the final say on local government decisions. Moreover, the two powers did not refrain from using violence to suppress uprisings and enforce their rule.[39]

Nevertheless, the new 'institutions and languages of international governance' introduced some ruptures with the Ottoman period.[40] Toby Dodge has shown that British policy in Iraq evolved between 1924 and 1932—when Iraq became formally independent—as a result of domestic and international pressures: Britain's loss of influence on the international stage and the need to make savings; the growing opposition of Iraqi nationalist milieus; and the difficulty of reconciling British interests with the increasing pressure of 'new international norms' that demanded a new form of legitimisation. In his view, the Mandate period marked 'the beginning of the end of European imperialism'.[41] Pierre-Jean Luizard has also stressed the emergence of a new form of legitimisation of colonial governance with the Mandate system, which pushed the British in Iraq to alternate between the use of violent force and the constant concern to justify their position through the setting up of institutions.[42] This argument was further developed by Susan Pedersen, who has argued that the various 'mechanisms' of the Mandate system (the annual reports, the right of petition, etc.) forced the Mandate powers to '*say* they were governing them differently', that is, to justify their rule in the public arena.[43] To put it differently, the League of Nations provided legitimacy to powers that conformed to new principles of international relations and governance. In *The Guardians*, Pedersen has shown that the Mandate powers were somehow concerned with this legitimacy.[44] In this respect, the Mandate period can be regarded as 'a hybrid, a half-way house between colonial rule and

[38] Cyrus Schayegh and Andrew Arsan (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook*, p. 3; Cyrus Schayegh, *The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World*, p. 135.
[39] Philip S. Khoury, 'Syria and the French Mandate, pp. 78–78; Jean-David Mizrahi, 'La France et sa politique de mandat en Syrie et au Liban (1920-1939)' in Nadine Méouchy (ed.), *France, Syrie et Liban 1918-1946*, p. 9; Susan Pedersen, 'The Meaning of the Mandates System', pp. 566–568; Michael Provence, *The Last Ottoman Generation*, pp. 84–87; Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, pp. 39–44, 51–52.
[40] Quote: Cyrus Schayegh and Andrew Arsan, 'Introduction', p. 135.
[41] Toby Dodge, 'International obligation', pp. 143–164.
[42] Pierre-Jean Luizard, 'Le mandat britannique en Irak', pp. 361–384.
[43] Susan Pedersen, *The Guardians*, p. 4.
[44] Ibid., p. 94.

independence'.[45] In terms of how the Mandate states functioned, it can also be noted that the Mandate system encouraged the development of new practices of governance based on the production of expertise.[46] The development of the Baghdad–Damascus route offered fertile ground for the collision between the principles of the Mandate system and the self-interested motivations of the two powers.

The growth of transdesert traffic between Syria and Iraq also raised discussions about the economic principles supported by the League of Nations and reflected in the Mandate system. The Open-Door doctrine, strongly advocated by U.S. President Wilson at the Paris Peace Conference, provided for equal economic opportunities for all League of Nations member states in the mandated territories. In the wake of the war, this principle was expected to mitigate inter-state tensions and conflicts and, above all, to prevent France and Great Britain from monopolising the economic benefits of their mandated territories.[47] The Mandate texts for Syria and Lebanon and for Iraq took up the economic principles expressed briefly in the Covenant of the League of Nations. They specified that the Mandate powers should not discriminate between their nationals and those of the member states of the League of Nations in matters of taxation, trade, industry, and so on and that they should apply 'freedom of transit under equitable conditions' through their territory, without any discrimination against goods coming from or going to any of the member states.[48] In short, the League of Nations conceived of the Middle East Mandates as territories open to international trade and mobility rather than as closed territorial states prone to exclusivist economic policies. After all, the League of Nations sought to secure the commercial interests of its member states. The economic rationale of the Mandate system encouraged the creation of a broad economic zone straddling the borders of the Mandate states in the Post-Ottoman Middle East. To some extent, the objectives pursued by the League of Nations were in line with British and French imperial interests. The

[45] Nadine Méouchy and Peter Sluglett, 'General Introduction' in Nadine Méouchy and Peter Sluglett (eds.), *The British and French Mandates in Comparative Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), p. 11.
[46] Philippe Bourmaud, Norig Neveu and Chantal Verdeil, 'Les mandats, canaux de la mise en expertise du monde colonial', in Philippe Bourmaud, Norig Neveu and Chantal Verdeil (eds.), *Experts et expertise dans les mandats de la société des nations: figures, champs, outils* (Paris: Presses de l'Inalco, 2020), pp. 9–54.
[47] James L. Gelvin, 'Was there a Mandates period?', p. 426; Benjamin Gerig, *The Open Door and the Mandates System: A Study of Economic Equality Before and Since the Establishment of the Mandates System* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1930), pp. 85–86, 109–112; Ramazan Hakkı Öztan, 'The Last Ottoman Merchants: Regional Trade and Politics of Tariffs in Aleppo's Hinterland, 1921-29', in Jordi Tejel and Ramazan Hakkı Öztan (eds.), *Regimes of Mobility*, p. 91; Susan Pedersen, *The Guardians*, pp. 233–237; Cyrus Schayegh, *The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World*, p. 134.
[48] For the Mandate texts, see LON, R21/1/9086/4200, Draft Resolution approving the terms of the Mandate for Syria and Lebanon, Art. 11; Draft of the Mandate for Mesopotamia, Art. 11.

development of transdesert traffic between Syria and Iraq was perfectly aligned with these goals.

The Syrian–Iraqi border

During the interwar period, the regions bordering the Syrian Desert were gradually incorporated into distinct national geographies. From among the cities that were connected by the caravan trade in the nineteenth century, Damascus and Aleppo became part of Syria, Diyarbakır was incorporated into Turkey, whereas Basra, Baghdad and Mosul became the main economic hubs of Iraq. The mandate given to France and Britain by the League of Nations was to pursue the formation of territorial states.[49] However, when the San Remo Conference in April 1920 recognised France as Mandate power over Syria and Lebanon and Great Britain as Mandate power over Iraq, Palestine and Transjordan, the borders of these states were not delimited. Two years later, the Mandate text for Syria and Lebanon specified that the borders of both states had yet to be defined.[50] In fact, the formation of state borders in the post-Ottoman Middle East was a gradual and lengthy process that spanned most of the interwar years.[51] This long process was particularly evident in the case of the Syrian–Iraqi border, which is of interest to this dissertation. To some extent, the delineation of this border took a back seat to that of the Turkish–Syrian and Turkish–Iraqi borders, as the French and British were primarily concerned with the final settlement of the Mosul Question and issues related to borders crossing more populated areas.[52]

As Eliezer Tauber has shown, Deir ez-Zor was one of the first bones of contention in the slow definition of the Syrian–Iraqi border. Before the First World War, Deir ez-Zor was the chief town of a *mutasarrifiyya* (administrative subdivision) directly dependent on Istanbul and located between the vilayet of Aleppo in the north-west and the vilayet of Baghdad in the south-

[49] Susan Pedersen, 'Getting Out of Iraq—in 1932: The League of Nations and the Road to Normative Statehood', *The American Historical Review* 115:4 (2010), pp. 975–1000; Carl Bryant Shook, 'The Origins and Development of Iraq's National Boundaries, 1918-1932: Policing and Political Geography in the Iraq-Nejd and Iraq-Syria Borderlands' (PhD thesis, The University of Chicago, 2018), p. 47.

[50] LON, File S1655/2/48/5, Mandate for Syria and the Lebanon, Geneva, 12 August 1922. See introductory words (before Art. 1).

[51] Seda Altuğ and Benjamin T. White, 'Frontières et pouvoir d'État: La frontière turco-syrienne dans les années 1920 et 1930', *Vingtieme Siècle. Revue d'histoire* 193:3 (2009), pp. 91–104; Nelida Fuccaro, *The Other Kurds: Yazidis in Colonial Iraq* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999), 113 ; Carl Bryant Shook, 'The Origins and Development of Iraq's National Boundaries'.

[52] British Library, Indian Office Records [hereinafter: BL, IOR]/L/PS/12/2848, Coll 17/4 'Iraq-Syria & Syria-Transjordan frontier: delimitation', Report of the League of Nations Commission entrusted by the Council with the Study of the frontier between Syria and Iraq, March 1932, p. 21. See also Amit Bein, *Kemalist Turkey and the Middle East: International Relations in the Interwar Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 41–42; Hassan Thuillard, *La naissance du territoire de l'Irak*, p. 26.

east. In 1918, the town found itself caught between Faysal's Arab forces that had taken up positions in Aleppo and the British forces occupying Baghdad. The latter briefly occupied the town in 1919, before withdrawing to Abu Kemal on the Euphrates in September 1919, leaving the field open to French forces. Subsequently, however, Arab troops took Deir ez-Zor and, over the next few months, made numerous incursions against British forces. In May 1920, a British–Arab commission agreed to define a provisional border between Syria and the British Mandate in Iraq, which would cross the Euphrates halfway between al-Qa'im and Abu Kemal. At the site, a boundary stone was erected at the point where the border was to cross the Euphrates, south-east of Abu Kemal.[53]

A few months later, French troops defeated Faysal's forces at the Battle of Maysalun and occupied the cities of the Syrian interior: Damascus, Aleppo and Deiz ez-Zor. Thereafter, on 23 December 1920, the French and British signed a convention that provisionally delimited the borders between the French Mandates in Syria and Lebanon and the British Mandates in Palestine and Iraq.[54] It also specified that a commission composed of French and British delegates would be set up within three months to 'trace on the spot the boundary line'; in the event of a dispute, the League of Nations would be called upon to take a final decision.[55] The Franco–British Convention of December 1920 remained a reference throughout the 1920s, even though the delimitation caused many disputes. Between 1921 and 1926, the commission conducted fieldwork to delimit the Syrian–Palestinian border.[56] During this period, moreover, the delimitation of the Syrian–Iraqi border south-west of Abu Kemal generated little discussion.[57] In contrast, its delimitation in the vicinity of Abu Kemal and north of the Euphrates in the Sinjar Mountain area was much more contentious. The British insisted that the Sinjar should not be divided administratively and asked that the 1920 Convention be amended. The French refused, aware nevertheless that the actual situation was to the advantage of the

[53] Eliezer Tauber, 'The Struggle for Dayr al-Zur: The Determination of Borders between Syria and Iraq', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 23:3 (1991), pp. 361–385. See also Sara Pursley, ''Lines Drawn on an Empty Map': Iraq's Borders and the Legend of the Artificial State (Part 2)', pp. 219–230.
[54] Ibid.
[55] 'Franco–British Convention on Certain Points Connected with the Mandates for Syria and the Lebanon, Palestine and Mesopotamia' (23 December 1920), *The American Journal of International Law* 16:3 (July 1922), pp. 122–126.
[56] Lauren Banko, 'Border Transgressions, Border Control: Mobility Along Palestine's Northern Frontier, 1930–46', in Jordi Tejel and Ramazan Hakkı Öztan (eds.), *Regimes of Mobility*, pp. 263–264; Asher Kaufman, *Contested Frontiers in the Syria-Lebanon-Israel Region* (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2014), pp. 11–18.
[57] BL, IOR/L/PS/12/2848 – Coll 17/4, Report of the Commission entrusted by the Council with the Study of the frontier between Syria and Iraq, 10 September 1932; Centre des Archives diplomatiques de Nantes [hereinafter: CADN], 1SL/1/V/637, 'Rapport de la Commission chargée de l'abornement de la frontière entre la Syrie et l'Irak', 9 November 1932.

British–Iraqi government, which now exercised 'its authority over all the tribes of Sinjar'.[58] In this area, the situation remained uncertain and the Syrian–Iraqi border unclear throughout the 1920s. The delimitation of the Syrian–Iraqi border was not settled until the early 1930s. It was only then that a commission was organised by the League of Nations to definitively fix the border. The proposals of the commission were accepted by the Council of the League of Nations on 30 October 1932 and a demarcation commission was sent to the site.[59]

In sum, during the interwar period, the post-Ottoman space was transformed by a series of far-reaching historical developments. The regions surrounding the Syrian Desert were integrated into French and British imperial domains, into Mandate spaces open to international transit, as well as into gradually territorialised states. This dissertation posits that a history of the Baghdad–Damascus route can shed new light on these historical developments, as transdesert mobility was shaped by and, in turn, influenced these interlocking processes. In order to better articulate the perspective adopted in this dissertation, it is worth discussing how Middle East historiography has investigated the reconfiguration of the post-Ottoman space in recent years.

Historiography

Towards a decentred history

This dissertation builds on and contributes to a growing body of historical scholarship that has recently reconsidered the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the post-Ottoman states without taking political or cultural units as the analytical framework. These studies represent a major contribution to the study of the post-Ottoman Middle East since, traditionally, the territories of the nation-states have often been assumed to be the natural unit of analysis.[60] Recent scholarship, in other words, has sought to eschew methodological nationalism, rejecting

[58] Quote: CADN, 1SL/1/V/655, 'Note sur les frontières syriennes', Intelligence Service of the High Commission for Syria and Lebanon, Beirut, 1 January 1925. See also Cosima Flateau, 'La frontière syro-irakienne. La lente définition de la frontière syro-irakienne (1920-1933) (2/2)', *Les clés du Moyen-Orient*, 9 May 2013 https://www.lesclesdumoyenorient.com/La-frontiere-syro-irakienne-La-lente-definition-de-la-frontiere-syro-irakienne.html (accessed 15 June 2022); Carl Bryant Shook, 'The Origins and Development of Iraq's National Boundaries', pp. 227–229.

[59] Cosima Flateau, 'La frontière syro-irakienne'; Nelida Fuccaro, *The Other Kurds*, pp. 110–131; BL, IOR/L/PS/12/2848 – Coll 17/4, Report of the Commission entrusted by the Council with the Study of the frontier between Syria and Iraq, 10 September 1932.

[60] For instance, Georges Corm, *Le Liban contemporain: Histoire et société* (Paris: La Découverte, 2003); Adeed Dawisha, *Iraq, A Political History from Independence to Occupation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Philip S. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*; Pierre-Jean Luizard, *La formation de l'Irak contemporain: Le rôle politique des ulémas chiites à la fin de la domination ottomane et au moment de la création de l'Etat irakien* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2002); Kamal Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions: The History of Lebanon Reconsidered* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1989); Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq*.

the ‘naturalisation of the nation-state’ and showing instead its historicity as well as the historicity of the national bounded space.[61] Moreover, the perspective of adopting a different unit of analysis from the state territory holds the potential to highlight the ‘plurality of competing spatial frameworks’.[62] Several approaches have been adopted to propose a decentred history of the Middle East in the interwar period.

One such perspective has been to follow cross-border movements, thereby highlighting new forms of causality and agency and, furthermore, revealing the interweaving of multi-scalar processes. Ramazan Hakkı Öztan, for example, has reconsidered the formation of the Syrian–Turkish border by examining the influences between smuggling, the global economic crisis of 1929, and the customs policies of Turkey and Mandate Syria, showing that the bordering process involved ‘a complex interplay of the local, the regional, and the global’.[63] Many historians have also looked into the movement of pilgrims, nomads, locusts and other human and non-humans agents across state borders, showing the persistence of pre-existing patterns of mobility and regional networks in the post-Ottoman Middle East as well as the tensions between ‘spaces of management and spaces of practice’.[64] In other words, by following practices of individual and collective mobility across state borders, these studies have demonstrated that the territories of post-Ottoman states overlapped with other spaces experienced and imagined by local populations. It has also shown that cross-border movements played a role in the formation of territorial states and, furthermore, that these political units did not ‘develop in isolation’.[65] Thus, these historical studies have helped to historicise the territorial states of the post-Ottoman Middle East and shed new light on the reshaping of post-Ottoman space in the interwar period.

The study of borderlands has also greatly enriched the historiography of the Middle East, showing that borderlands were ‘zones of interaction, contention and influence central to

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[61] Quote: Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller, ‘Methodological nationalism and beyond: nation–state building, migration and the social sciences’, *Global Networks* 2:4 (2002), p. 304.

[62] Quote: Matthias Middell and Katja Naumann, ‘Global history and the spatial turn: from the impact of area studies to the study of critical junctures of globalization’, *Journal of Global History* 5:1 (2010), p. 155.

[63] Ramazan Hakkı Öztan, ‘The Great Depression and the Making of Turkish-Syrian Border, 1921–1939’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 52:2 (May 2020), p. 155. For another study of interwar smuggling that highlights processes operating at multiple scales and multiple layers of territorialisation, see Cyrus Schayegh, ‘The many worlds of Abud Yasin; or, what narcotics trafficking in the interwar Middle East can tell us about territorialization’, *The American Historical Review* 116:2 (2011), pp. 273–306.

[64] Quote: Samuel Dolbee, ‘The Locust and the Starling: People, Insects, and Disease in the Ottoman Jazira and After, 1860-1930’ (PhD thesis, New York, 2016), p. 16. See also Toufoul Abou-Hodeib, ‘Sanctity across the Border: Pilgrimage Routes and State Control in Mandate Lebanon and Palestine’, in Cyrus Schayegh and Andrew Arsan (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook*, pp. 383–394; Liat Kozma, *Global Women, Colonial Ports: Prostitution in the Interwar Middle East* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017); Michael Provence, *The Last Ottoman Generation*, here: p. 7; Laura Stocker, ‘The ‘Camel Dispute’’, pp. 319–350.

[65] Quote: Sebastian Conrad, *What is Global History?*, pp. 65, 118.

state- and nation-formation across the Middle East'.[66] Since the 1990s, borderlands studies have highlighted the mutually influencing and constitutive relationship between central states and border zones, demonstrating also the influence of the social, economic, political and cultural dynamics of borderlands on the formation of borders.[67] Thus, as Jordi Tejel has argued, looking at borderlands allows for bottom-up narratives on the transition from empire to territorial states in the Middle East.[68] In recent years, numerous studies have explored the extent to which borderlanders adapted to, influenced, and sometimes benefited from post-war political and territorial developments, while also underlining limitations to these actors' agency.[69]

In a similar vein, many historians have focused on spaces that did not correspond to the territories of nation-states, such as global localities, regional spaces, environmental spaces and empires.[70] In the early 2000s, the collective volume edited by Christopher A. Bayly and Leila Fawaz sought to rehabilitate the field of area studies—which had been heavily criticised in the wake of Edward Said's well-known book, *Orientalism*—by presenting it as a fruitful approach to 'the study of boundaries and people who crossed boundaries', as long as historians interrogated the borders between regions and states.[71] More recently, a growing number of historians have focused on environmental spaces—which often do not match political entities—and thus avoided 'the traditional concentration of historians on political or administrative

[66] Jordi Tejel and Ramazan Hakkı Öztan, 'Introduction: Regimes of Mobility in Middle Eastern Borderlands, 1918–1946', in Jordi Tejel and Ramazan Hakkı Öztan (eds.), *Regimes of Mobility*, pp. 13–14.
[67] Michiel Baud and Willem van Schendel, 'Toward a Comparative History of Borderlands', *Journal of World History* 8:2 (1997), pp. 212–215; Pekka Hämäläinen and Samuel Truett, 'On Borderlands', *The Journal of American History* 98:2 (2011), pp. 338–361; Paul Readman, Cynthia Radding and Chad Bryant, 'Introduction' in Paul Readman et al. (eds.), *Borderlands in World History, 1700-1914* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 1–23; Randy William Widdis, 'Looking Through the Mirror: A Historical Geographical View of the Canadian–American Borderlands', *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 30:2 (2015), pp. 175–188.
[68] Jordi Tejel Gorgas, 'Making borders from below: the emergence of the Turkish–Iraqi Frontier, 1918–1925', *Middle Eastern Studies* 54:5 (May 2018), pp. 811–826.
[69] Matthey H. Ellis, *Desert Borderland: The Making of Modern Egypt and Libya* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018); Robert S. G. Fletcher, *British Imperialism and 'The Tribal Question'*; Ramazan Hakkı Öztan, 'The Great Depression'; Carl Bryant Shook, 'The Origins and Development of Iraq's National Boundaries, 1918-1932'; Jordi Tejel, '"Des femmes contre des moutons": Franchissements féminins de la frontière turco-syrienne (1929-1944)' *20&21. Revue d'histoire* No.145 (2020), pp. 35–47; Jordi Tejel, 'States of Rumors: Politics of Information Along the Turkish-Syrian Border, 1925–1945,' *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 37:1 (2022) pp. 95–113.
[70] For other studies than those detailed in the text, see Nile Green, 'The Trans-Border Traffic of Afghan Modernism: Afghanistan and the Indian "Urdusphere"', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 53:3 (2011), pp. 479–508; Valeska Huber, *Channelling Mobilities*; Jacob Norris, *Land of Progress*.
[71] Leila T. Fawaz and Christopher A. Bayly, 'Introduction: The Connected World of Empires', in Leila Tarazi Fawaz and Christopher A. Bayly (eds.), *Modernity and Culture: From the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 8.

territorial divisions', as Alan Mikhail puts it.[72] Deserts and oceans served as particularly illuminating frameworks of analysis in this respect.[73]

The Syrian Desert was the analytical focus of the recent book by Vincent Capdepuy, who justified his perspective as being able to break out of the confines of the political realm and trace the region's history over the long term.[74] Robert S. G. Fletcher, for his part, has approached the Syrian Desert as a 'single unit of analysis' to provide a corrective to studies of the Mandate period that were overly 'centred on the political units that later became nation-states'.[75] By combining a regional perspective with a focus on cross-border mobility, he has insightfully revisited the emergence of nation-states in the interwar Middle East, showing in particular that British desert administrators 'were often more concerned with managing movement across the region than with the making of citizens'.[76] *British Imperialism and 'The Tribal Question'* has thus been a major inspiration for this dissertation. However, as will be developed further in this dissertation, Robert S. G. Fletcher's primary focus on the British Empire has entailed a different analytical bias.[77] By studying the 'desert corridor' that the British strove to establish through Palestine, Transjordan and Iraq at the time, his book has overlooked patterns of cooperation and competition between the French and the British, which played a major role in shaping the Syrian Desert as a space of mobility.

Throughout the interwar period, indeed, the main transdesert route remained the one linking Damascus with Baghdad. Consequently, the development of transdesert mobility provided fertile ground for many forms of interaction between the French and British—with officials and administrators in Paris/London, Beirut/Baghdad and in the Syrian–Iraqi borderlands not always displaying the same attitude towards each other. Transimperial connectivity, cooperation and competition had an impact on various aspects of transdesert

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[72] Alan Mikhail, *Water on Sand: Environmental Histories of the Middle East and North Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press , 2012), p. 11.

[73] Camille Lefevbre, *Frontières de sable, frontières de papier. Histoire de territoires et de frontières, du jihad de Sokoto à la colonisation française du Niger (XIXe-XXe siècles)* (Paris: Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2015); James McDougall and Judith Scheele (eds.), *Saharan Frontiers: Space and Mobility in Northwest* Africa (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012); John Perry, 'A Shared Sea'; Lindsey R. Stephenson, 'Rerouting the Persian Gulf: The Transnationalization of Iranian Migrant Networks, c. 1900-1940' (PhD thesis, Princeton University, 2018).

[74] Vincent Capdepuy, *Chroniques du bord du monde: Histoire d'un désert entre Syrie, Irak et Arabie* (Paris: Payot, 2021), pp. 20–22.

[75] Robert S. G. Fletcher, *British Imperialism and 'The Tribal Question*', p. 69.

[76] Ibid., p. 135.

[77] As Daniel Hedinger and Nadin Heé put it, the drive to undo methodological nationalism by looking at connections beyond nationally bounded spaces led some historians to adopt a 'national-imperial framework'—that is, to focus on single empires as if they existed on their own. Daniel Hedinger and Nadin Heé, 'Transimperial History - Connectivity, Cooperation and Competition', *Journal of Modern European History* 16:4 (November 2018), p. 429. According to James R. Fichter, the tendency to view empires as separate entities operating 'in isolation' is more typical of historical research on the British Empire than on the French Empire. James R. Fichter, *British and French Colonialism in Africa, Asia and the Middle East*, p. 9.

mobility, such as the organisation of traffic, the business of transport and the management of cross-border mobility.[78] As the different chapters of the dissertation will show, French and British convergent and divergent objectives led to collaborative efforts, but also to competition and, at times, bitter conflict.

In doing so, this dissertation contributes to the study of Franco–British relations in the Middle East and, more broadly, to the literature that has examined movements, networks and interactions between the French and British empires.[79] Much of the literature on the Middle East Mandates dealing with Franco–British relations has emphasised the growing rivalry that took shape around the Sykes–Picot Agreement during the war, intensified throughout the interwar years, before coming to a head during the Second World War.[80] However, an increasing number of studies have also shown the ways in which French and British administrators cooperated and exchanged information and expertise.[81] This dissertation engages with these discussions about Franco–British competition and cooperation in the realm of discourse and practice, showing that the issues of security, border management and mobility surrounding the Baghdad–Damas route gradually made collaboration desirable for the French and British Mandate authorities in Syria and Iraq.

This dissertation also articulates a transimperial history of the Baghdad–Damascus route because the chapters seek to understand the role of 'in-between' actors, infrastructure and space.[82] In this I follow Daniel Hedinger and Nadin Heé who argue that the transimperial approach differs from the simple study of 'interimperial' interactions by investigating how the 'spaces in-between empires' influence, transform and disrupt imperial connectivity.[83] As they rightly point out, these spaces—be they oceans, deserts, forests, borderlands, etc.—are often

[78] The transimperial approach, according to Daniel Hedinger and Nadin Heé, consists first of all in examining 'imperial competition, cooperation and connectivity not as separate phenomena but as entangled processes'. Daniel Hedinger and Nadin Heé, 'Transimperial History', p 430.
[79] Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).
[80] Cyrus Schayegh and Andrew Arsan (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook*, p. 8. On Franco-British rivalry in the Middle East, see also Anne-Lucie Chaigne-Oudin, *La France et les rivalités occidentales au Levant*; Philip S. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, pp. 583–618; Gérard D. Khoury, 'Introduction de partie', pp. 75–89.
[81] Note that Anne-Lucie Chaigne-Oudin, mentioned above, has also highlighted instances of cooperation between the French and the British: Anne-Lucie Chaigne-Oudin, *op cit.*, pp. 265–270. See also James Casey, 'Sacred Surveillance: Indian Muslims, Waqf, and the Evolution of State Power in French Mandate Syria', in James R. Fichter (ed.), *British and French Colonialism in Africa, Asia and the Middle East*, p. 104; Guillemette Crouzet, 'A Second "Fashoda"? Britain, India, and a French "Threat" in Oman at the End of the Nineteenth Century', in James R. Fichter (ed.), *British and French Colonialism in Africa, Asia and the Middle East*, p. 149; Martin Thomas, 'Anglo–French Imperial Relations in the Arab World: Intelligence Liaison and Nationalist Disorder, 1920–1939', *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 17:4 (2006), pp. 771–798; Martin Thomas and Richard Toye, *Arguing about Empire: Imperial Rhetoric in Britain and France, 1882-1956* (Oxford: Oxford University Press , 2017), p. 6.
[82] Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo and Damiano Matasci, 'Imperialism, Internationalism and Globalisation in Twentieth Century Africa', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 48:5 (September 2020), p. 796.
[83] Daniel Hedinger and Nadin Heé, 'Transimperial History', pp. 445–446.

seen as a mere surface on which mobility takes place. By contrast, the *trans*-imperial approach aims, firstly, to pay attention to 'the environmental disposition and materiality of the space itself'.[84] Accordingly, this dissertation will take into account the importance of the desert terrain in the formation of the transport system that linked the French and British mandated territories. Secondly, a transimperial perspective also involves considering the role of non-imperial actors who operated between and beyond empires[85]—a perspective that also resonates with borderlands studies. This dissertation illuminates the way travellers, entrepreneurs, nomadic groups and many other non-state actors facilitated or disrupted connections and movements between the French and British Mandates in Syria and Iraq, sometimes also seeking to create alternative routes.

Lastly, the historiography of the modern Middle East has rarely considered together Iraq, on the one hand, and Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and Transjordan, on the other, in the interwar period.[86] In contrast, numerous studies have looked at the movements and interaction between these four states located to the west and southwest of the Syrian Desert, examining continuities and ruptures in the transition of the region of Bilad al-Sham from the late Ottoman period to the Mandate period.[87] Attested since the sixth century, the term 'Bilad al-Sham' has referred to a blurred geographical entity located between the Mediterranean Sea to the west, the Sinai Desert to the south, the Syrian Desert to the east and the Anatolian mountains to the north—a region overlapping but not limited to present-day Syria.[88] As Cyrus Schayegh has

[84] Ibid., p. 447.

[85] Damiano Matasci and Jerónimo Miguel Bandeira, 'Une histoire transimpériale de l'Afrique: concepts, approches et perspectives', *Revue d'Histoire Contemporaine de l'Afrique* N° 3 (2022), pp. 7–8 ; Daniel Hedinger and Nadin Heé, 'Transimperial History', p. 445.

[86] Cyrus Schayegh and Andrew Arsan (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook,* p. 15. Exceptions include some studies on nationalism that have paid attention to the transnational circulation of ideas, notably between Syria and Iraq, as well as studies on the movement of students and religious figures. See for example Hilary Falb Kalisman, 'Bursary Scholars at the American University of Beirut: Living and Practising Arab Unity', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 42:4 (2015), pp. 599–617; Sabrina Mervin, 'La quête du savoir à Naǧaf. Les études religieuses chez les chi'ites imâmites de la fin du XIXe siècle à 1960', *Studia Islamica* No. 85 (1995), pp. 165–185; Miriam Younes, 'A Tale of Two Communists: The Revolutionary Projects of the Lebanese Communists Husayn Muruwwa and Mahdi 'Amil, Arab Studies Journal 24:1 (2016), pp. 98–116; Peter Wien, *Arab Nationalism: The Politics of History and Culture in the Modern Middle East* (London/New York: Routledge, 2017).

[87] To name but a few: Toufoul Abou-Hodeib, 'Sanctity across the Border'; Lauren Banko: 'Claiming Identities in Palestine: Migration and Nationality under the Mandate', *Journal of Palestine Studies* 46:2 (2017), pp. 26–43; Asher Kaufman, *Contested Frontiers*; Norig Neveu, 'Polysemic Borders: Melkite and Orthodox Clerics and Laymen in the Emirate of Transjordan, 1920s–1940s', in Jordi Tejel and Ramazan Hakkı Öztan (eds.), *Regimes of Mobility,* pp. 141–169; Laila Parsons, 'Rebels without Borders: Southern Syria and Palestine, 1919–1936', in Cyrus Schayegh and Andrew Arsan (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook*, pp. 395–407; Cyrus Schayegh, 'The many worlds of Abud Yasin'; Cyrus Schayegh, *The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World*; Andrea L. Stanton, 'Locating Palestine's Summer Residence: Mandate Tourism and National Identity', *Journal of Palestine Studies* 47:2 (2018), pp. 44–62.

[88] Dominique Chevallier, 'Consciences Syriennes et Représentations Cartographiques à la Fin du XIX^{e} Siècle et au Début du XX^{e} Siècle', in Thomas Philipp (ed.), *The Syrian Land in the 18th and 19th Century: The Common and the Specific in the Historical Experience* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1992), pp. 1–10.

argued, this region remained undefined throughout the Ottoman period and afterwards, with blurred boundaries and multiple identities, and furthermore retained a predominance of local structures.[89] Nevertheless, the relative significant integration of the 'Syrian lands' before the twentieth century, or at least the important connections between its cities and hinterlands, explains the sheer number of studies on how Bilad al-Sham evolved during the interwar period.[90]

For Cyrus Schayegh and Andrew Arsan, the lack of research on the interactions between Iraq and 'its four neighbours to the west' is partly due to the different 'socio-economic and political trajectories' followed by Bilad al-Sham and Ottoman Iraq prior to the First World War.[91] Similarly, other historians have considered that these two regions were incorporated into separate trade networks during the nineteenth century. James Gelvin, for example, has argued that the orientation of Syrian and Iraqi trade in opposite directions in the early twentieth century explained why post-war partition plans treated Syria and Iraq as two separate territories. As he put it, 'the lines that separated the proto-states and the cohesive potential of those states were not entirely based on whim', but also on Ottoman legacy.[92] This assertion stems from the idea that the transdesert caravan trade declined during the nineteenth century. While this assumption does not seem to be consistent with the findings of recent research, as will be discussed in the preliminary chapter, it nevertheless helps to explain the scarcity of studies examining together Iraq and Syria in the interwar period.

Admittedly, several historians of the Ottoman period have referred to the regions surrounding the Syrian Desert as the 'Fertile Crescent'.[93] In doing so, they have borrowed a term coined by the American Egyptologist James H. Breasted in 1916 to designate the steppe lands stretching between the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf, which formed 'a kind of cultivable fringe of the desert'.[94] However, no such term has been commonly used by historians

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[89] Cyrus Schayegh, 'On Scales and Spaces: Reading Gottlieb Schumacher's *The Jaulân* (1888)', in Liat Kozma, Cyrus Schayegh and Avner Wishnitzer (eds.), *A Global Middle East: Mobility, Materiality and Culture in the Modern Age, 1880-1940* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), pp. 27–31; Cyrus Schayegh, *The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World*, pp. 3–4, 41–48.

[90] Quote: Thomas Philipp and Birgit Schäbler (eds.), *The Syrian Land: Processes of Integration and Fragmentation*.

[91] Cyrus Schayegh and Andrew Arsan (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook*, p. 15.

[92] James L. Gelvin, 'Was there a Mandates period?', p. 423.

[93] Charles Issawi, *The Fertile Crescent 1800-1914: A Documentary Economic History* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 3; Faruk Tabak, 'Local Merchants in Peripheral Areas of the Empire: The Fertile Crescent during the Long Nineteenth Century', *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 11:2 (1988), pp. 179–214. See also Albert Hourani, 'The Changing Face of the Fertile Crescent in the XVIIIth Century', *Studia Islamica* No. 8 (1957), pp. 89–12.

[94] Vincent Capdepuy, 'Le "Croissant fertile". Naissance, définition et usages d'un concept géohistorique', *L'Information géographique* 72:2 (2008), pp. 89–106 ; Vincent Capdepuy, *Chroniques du bord du monde*, p. 20;

writing about the twentieth century. And yet, the interwar years marked a period when the eastern and western edges of the Syrian Desert became profoundly more integrated, at the same time as they were incorporated into separate national geographies. This dissertation thus aims to fill the gap in research by exploring how the Baghdad–Damascus route intertwined the French and British Mandate territories and knitted the regions surrounding the Syrian Desert together. It takes up and expands on Vincent Capdepuy's argument that the development of motorised transport across the Syrian Desert was one of the factors that contributed to the 'revival of the centrality of Syrian-Iraqi space' during the interwar period.[95]

Mobility and its constraints

Over the past two decades, the rise of mobility studies has generated much debate. Some researchers have criticised the overemphasis on connectivity and integration in scholarship, while others have regretted 'the fetishization of mobility'.[96] In recent years, however, research in the social sciences has developed insightful approaches. Already in 2006, Kevin Hannam, Mimi Sheller and John Urry stressed the need to study together 'mobilities, immobilities and moorings', and how power relations play into them.[97] Since then, the 'mobility turn' has driven scholars to think both about mobility and its limits (such as infrastructural, socio-economic and political impediments to movement), to study the interactions between mobility and structures (institutions, infrastructure, physical space, etc.), as well as to explore the possibility of disconnections, disruptions and breakages in networks.[98] These historiographical debates have also influenced historical research on the Middle East.

Thomas Scheffler, ''Fertile Crescent', 'Orient', 'Middle East': The Changing Mental Maps of Southwest Asia', *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire* 10:2 (2003), pp. 253–256.

[95] Vincent Capdepuy, 'Proche ou Moyen-Orient ? Géohistoire de la notion de Middle East', *L'Espace géographique* 37:3 (2008), pp. 225–238. In French: 'réactualisation de l'espace syro-irakien'.

[96] Quote: Sebastian Conrad, *What is Global History?*, p. 225. For these critiques and subsequent debates, see Jeremy Adelman, 'What is global history now?', *Aeon*, 2 March 2017; Richard Drayton and David Motadel, 'Discussion: The Futures of Global History', *Journal of Global History* 13:1 (March 2018), pp. 1–21; Daniel Hedinger and Nadin Heé, 'Transimperial History', pp. 445–446; David Lambert and Peter Merriman, 'Empire and mobility: An introduction', in David Lambert and Peter Merriman (eds.), *Empire and Mobility in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), pp. 7–12; Nina Glick Schiller and Noel B. Salazar, 'Regimes of Mobility Across the Globe', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 39: 2 (2013), p. 184.

[97] Kevin Hannam, Mimi Sheller and John Urry, 'Editorial: Mobilities, Immobilities and Moorings', *Mobilities* 1:1 (March 2006), pp. 1–22.

[98] Tim Creswell, 'Towards a Politics of Mobility', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 28:1 (February 2010), pp. 17–31; Tim Cresswell, *On the Move*; Nina Glick Schiller and Noel B. Salazar, 'Regimes of Mobility Across the Globe', pp. 183–200; Valeska Huber, 'Multiple Mobilities: Über den Umgang mit verschiedenen Mobilitätsformen um 1900', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 36:2 (2010), pp. 317–341; Vincent Kaufmann, 'Mobility: Trajectory of a Concept in the Social Sciences', in Gijs Mom, Gordon Pirie and Laurent Tissot (eds.), *Mobility in History*, pp. 41–60; William Walters, 'Migration, vehicles, and politics: Three theses on viapolitics', *European Journal of Social Theory* 18:4 (2014), pp. 469–488.

In his study of communications and transport in late nineteenth century Egypt, On Barak has pointed out that the success of technological developments often obscures the process by which they occur.[99] For his part, he has shown that the development of the railway, the telegraph and the telephone in Egypt was not a seamless process, emphasising this by beginning each chapter with the story of an accident. Similarly, Mikiya Koyagi has devoted a chapter of *Iran in Motion* to the numerous accidents that prevented the newly built Trans-Iranian Railway in the 1940s from directly producing the speedy traffic that officials and engineers had hoped for.[100] These two studies remind us that the mobility of people, goods or information was connected to the operation of the systems that underpinned them. Other historians have emphasised the combined role of multiple human and non-human agents in the formation of transport and communication infrastructures. In doing so, they have emphasised the complex process of formation of socio-enviro-technical systems whose outcome and workings often did not match the objectives of any single actor.[101] In its study of the transport system underpinning the Baghdad–Damascus route, this dissertation draws on these works and, more broadly, on literature that has connected environmental history with the history of technology.[102]

Furthermore, historical scholarship has widely demonstrated the tension between the aspiration to mobility, fluidity and speed and the desire for stability, order and control that have characterised our world since the early nineteenth century. This twofold pattern has sometimes been seen as a feature of globalisation and sometimes of modernity.[103] This has also been highlighted in the context of the Ottoman and post-Ottoman Middle East. Reşat Kasaba has shown that, while mobility remained a fundamental characteristic of the Ottoman Empire until its end, the Ottoman state became increasingly concerned with monitoring and organising mobility within its territory, and even sedentarising the nomadic groups, between the sixteenth

[99] On Barak, *On Time*, p. 8.
[100] Mikiya Koyagi, *Iran in Motion*, pp. 113–135.
[101] Camille Lyans Cole, 'Precarious Empires: A Social and Environmental History of Steam Navigation on the Tigris', *Journal of Social History* 50:1 (2016), pp. 74–101; Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts*, pp. 19–53; Fulya Özkan, 'Winding Road to Modernization Trabzon-Erzurum-Bayezid Road in the Late Ottoman World', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 34:1 (2014), pp. 191–205. On the 'social complexity' of infrastructure, see Penelope Harvey, Casper Bruun Jensen and Atsuro Morita (eds.), *Infrastructures and Social Complexity: A Companion* (London/New York: Routledge, 2016).
[102] Sara B. Pritchard and Carl A. Zimring, *Technology and the Environment in History: Nature and Technology in History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020); Sara B. Pritchard, 'Toward an Environmental History of Technology' in Andrew C. Isenberg (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 227–257; Jeffrey K. Stine and Joel A. Tarr, 'At the Intersection of Histories: Technology and the Environment', *Technology and Culture* 39:4 (1998), pp. 601–640.
[103] Tim Cresswell, *On the Move*, pp. 15–21; Emily S. Rosenberg, 'Introduction', in Emily S. Rosenberg (ed.), *A World Connecting, 1870–1945* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2021), pp. 3–4.

and early twentieth centuries.[104] Other historians have shown that the increase in mobility during the nineteenth century went hand in hand with a growing mistrust of such movements by the Ottoman state, leading to the adoption of new documents and practices to identify and control itinerant people.[105] Focusing on the Suez Canal, Valeska Huber has convincingly demonstrated that the first wave of globalisation of the late nineteenth century was characterised by processes of both acceleration and deceleration of mobility, associated with practices of 'channelling' of mobility, that is, 'the differentiation, regulation and bureaucratisation of different kinds of movement'.[106] Looking at the interwar period, Liat Kozma has shown that the League of Nations and the French and British Mandate powers intensified regulations on prostitution and strengthened surveillance of the movement of prostitutes in the Eastern Mediterranean. Thus, she has argued that 'travel restrictions in themselves were a globalizing practice'—a point also made by Ronen Shamir.[107] The interwar period raised these questions in new terms, due an even greater intensification of mobility and the presence of new actors in the post-Ottoman Middle East, but also to the formation of new territorial states. These developments, as argued by Jordi Tejel and Ramazan Hakkı Öztan, resulted in 'a radical re-ordering of the region's existing *regimes of mobility*'.[108] Historical scholarship has recently examined these mobility regimes in increasingly rich and fruitful ways, showing the persistence of pre-existing modes of mobility, but also their reshaping as a result of new norms, regulations and practices that promoted and regulated mobility in selective ways.[109] This dissertation

[104] Reşat Kasaba, *A Moveable Empire: Ottoman Nomads, Migrants, and Refugees* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009), pp. 13–122.
[105] David Gutman, 'Travel Documents, Mobility Control, and the Ottoman State in an Age of Global Migration, 1880–1915', *Journal of the Ottoman and Turkish Studies Association* 3:2 (November 2016), pp. 347–368; Will Hanley, 'Papers for Going: Papers for Staying: Identification and Subject Formation in the Eastern Mediterranean', in Liat Kozma, Cyrus Schayegh and Avner Wishnitzer (eds.), *A Global Middle East*, p. 180; Christoph Herzog, 'Migration and the State: On Ottoman Regulations concerning Migration since the Age of Mahmud II', in Ulrike Freitag et al. (eds.), *The City in the Ottoman Empire: Migration and the Making of Urban Modernity* (London/New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 117–134.
[106] Quote: Valeska Huber, *Channelling Mobilities*, p. 3.
[107] Quote: Liat Kozma, *Global Women, Colonial Ports*, p. 55; Ronen Shamir, 'Without Borders? Notes on Globalization as a Mobility Regime', *Sociological Theory* 23:2 (June 2005), pp. 197–217.
[108] Jordi Tejel and Ramazan Hakkı Öztan (eds.), *Regimes of Mobility*, p. 3. Original emphasis.
[109] Victoria Abrahamyan, 'Citizen Strangers: Identity Labelling and Discourse in the French Mandatory Syria, 1920–1932', *Journal of Migration History* 6:1 (2020), pp. 40–61; Lauren Banko, 'Keeping Out the 'Undesirable Elements': The Treatment of Communists, Transients, Criminals, and the Ill in Mandate Palestine', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 47:6 (November 2019), pp. 1153–1180; Lauren Banko; 'Refugees, Displaced Migrants, and Territorialization in Interwar Palestine', *Mashriq & Mahjar* 5:2 (2018), pp. 19–48; Robert S. G. Fletcher, *British Imperialism and 'The Tribal Question'*; Philippe Pétriat, 'The Uneven Age of Speed'; Haggai Ram, *Intoxicating Zion: A Social History of Hashish in Mandatory Palestine and Israel* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020); Jordi Tejel and Ramazan Hakkı Öztan, 'The Special Issue 'Forced Migration and Refugeedom in the Modern Middle East' Towards Connected Histories of Refugeedom in the Middle East', *Journal of Migration History* 6:1 (2020), pp. 1–15; Benjamin Thomas White, *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East: The Politics of Community in French Mandate Syria* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011).

revisits the question of mobility and its limits by examining together the multiple environmental, infrastructural and socio-political factors that encouraged or restricted mobility, thus offering a comprehensive but fine-grained understanding of the reshaping of mobility regimes in the interwar Middle East.

Outline of the dissertation

This dissertation is organised thematically, with each chapter approaching the Baghdad–Damascus route from a different angle and thus contributing to the arguments developed throughout this work on the interplay between mobility, states and spaces. In doing so, it pays attention to the temporal dimensions of the Baghdad–Damascus route in several ways. Firstly, the dissertation begins with a preliminary chapter that delves into the transformations of transdesert mobility during the late Ottoman period (from the second third of the nineteenth century to the early 1920s), considering also the early uses of motorised transport during the First World War and the immediate post-war period. Secondly, the two-part structure of the dissertation captures the developments of the Baghdad–Damascus route over the two decades. Part I deals with the formation of the Baghdad–Damascus route from 1923 onwards and, as such, focuses mainly on the 1920s. Part II deals with mobility practices and thus covers the entire interwar period, ending with the first events associated with the Second World War in 1939–40. Finally, the different chapters take into account the changing context between the two world wars. During the 'Ottoman twilight' of the 1920s, the political, economic and symbolic foundations of the emerging nation states were uncertain.[110] In contrast, the 1930s saw a gradual consolidation of the post-Ottoman states and a greater significance of their borders.[111]

In Part I, this dissertation investigates the early development of the Baghdad–Damascus route, examining the forces and agents that enabled, constrained and shaped the development of transdesert mobility. Chapter 1 traces the formation of the transdesert transport system, showing that its development was driven by a combination of environmental, technological and socio-political factors. Cars and vans, early transport entrepreneurs, government officials, as well as the desert terrain, climatic conditions and regular flooding, all shaped and/or disrupted the transport system. Together, these multiple human and non-human agents favoured the development of motorised rather than rail transport across the Syrian Desert. They also established the main transdesert route between Damascus and Baghdad, thus interweaving the

[110] Quote: Cyrus Schayegh, *The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World*, p. 11.
[111] Ibid., p. 206.

French and British Mandate spaces. While the environmental dispositions of the Syrian Desert presented opportunities for the expansion of motorised transport, they also posed constraints and, in the case of flooding and rainfall, made the transport system precarious. In the end, the transport system led to a great intensification of transdesert mobility but was nevertheless affected by many disruptions causing major delays and hardship to travellers.

Chapter 2 examines the development of the Baghdad–Damascus route through the lens of insecurity. For much of the interwar period, travelling through the desert entailed some risk and was not always a pleasant experience. Poor visibility, especially during sandstorms, could cause drivers and passengers to get lost for hours or even days. Breakdowns were another source of danger. Above all, the convoys of cars travelling between Syria and Iraq were at times attacked by Bedouins, brigands and insurgents who robbed the passengers and sometimes caused casualties. During the Great Syrian Revolt of 1925–1926, in particular, many convoys were raided. Highway robbers often achieved their goal by exploiting their knowledge of the desert areas and crossing state borders to escape capture. The prevailing insecurity on the desert tracks greatly affected mobility and prompted the Mandate authorities in Syria and Iraq, but also in Palestine and Transjordan, to cooperate in order to secure traffic. In addition, highway robberies led to the reinforcement of state authority in the desert borderlands. At the same time, insecurity led the authorities to increasingly organise transdesert traffic, introducing safety measures which, in turn, hampered transdesert mobility.

To conclude Part I, Chapter 3 looks at the business of transdesert transport, examining the interdependence and tensions between transport contractors and states. It shows, on the one hand, that local and foreign entrepreneurs succeeded in developing commercial transport across territorial and imperial boundaries by exploiting the needs of post-Ottoman states and envisaging the Syrian Desert as a regional terrain for economic expansion. Over time, the transport sector experienced increased competition, which led transport companies to lower their fares and specialise. On the other hand, the Mandate powers intervened heavily in the transport sector to advance their interests, but also, to some extent, those of the local populations. For their part, local governments lobbied for the proxy states to support local entrepreneurs as well. In the 1930s, the development, supported by the British, of a new transdesert route between Haifa and Baghdad changed the situation. This situation rekindled Franco-British rivalries and led the two powers to develop transport policies that tended to favour only the large and powerful companies on each of the two routes. At that time, Iraq, which had become independent in 1932, also took a stronger stand.

In Part II, this dissertation examines the different forms of mobility that developed across the Syrian Desert on a regional and transregional scale and investigates the interplay of these movements with the territorial and spatial reconfigurations of the interwar Middle East. Chapter 4 explores the mutual influence between the intensification of transdesert mobility and the formation of territorially bounded states. This chapter approaches the formation of the Syrian–Iraqi border as a process involving the development of controls on cross-border mobility, the formation of a border infrastructure, as well as norms and practices of inclusion and exclusion. By examining patterns of mobility control and border management, it confirms earlier findings that the post-Ottoman states developed techniques for regulating, controlling and channelling mobility across emerging state borders, seeking to balance the promotion and restriction of movement. They also developed new discourses of inclusion and exclusion that resulted in differential treatment of the mobility of tourists, pilgrims, journalists and many people considered 'undesirable' by the authorities. At the same time, the chapters highlight serious limitations on the states' ability to monitor mobility. Finally, it demonstrates that, conversely, mobility has shaped states and their borders. This will be shown through the many ways in which transdesert mobility influenced the distribution of state power across space, caused a permanent readjustment of measures to promote and regulate mobility, and resulted in reactions of territorialisation and economic exclusivism.

The dissertation then examines how transdesert mobility reconfigured the connectivity of the regions surrounding the Syrian Desert. Chapter 5 investigates how the Baghdad–Damascus route became a hub for trans regional forms of mobility between Europe, Central Asia and the Arabian Peninsula. Whereas in the nineteenth century, European tourists visited the Mediterranean rim without going further east, in the interwar period an increasing number of them crossed the Syrian Desert to Iraq. Similarly, the 1920s and 1930s saw the development of overland pilgrimage routes, with the Baghdad–Damascus route attracting large numbers of Muslim pilgrims on their way to Mecca. On the one hand, the chapter shows that the integration of the transdesert transport system into transregional networks created great economic opportunities for transport entrepreneurs operating between Damascus and Baghdad, who therefore sought to foster these connections. On the other hand, it reveals that the dependence on long-distance travellers was a source of risk for transport companies. In particular, the development of alternative routes bypassing the Syrian Desert could affect transdesert traffic and pose a threat to transporters. Transregional connections, in other words, could never be taken for granted.

Chapter 6 concludes by exploring new travel practices among the populations of the regions surrounding the Syrian Desert, particularly Iraqis, Syrians and Lebanese. Many journalists travelled inside their own country and across the Syrian–Iraqi border, reporting on their travels in the press. In doing so, they raised awareness of these places among their readers and stimulated their desire to visit them. The interwar period also witnessed the rise of regional tourism. In addition, the new travel opportunities were seized by pan-Arab intellectuals who encouraged people to travel in the countries surrounding the Syrian Desert, and even as far as Egypt, in order to create bonds and affinities across state borders. All of these travel practices were, to some extent, formative of a regional space transcending the Syrian-Iraqi border. Finally, the chapter explores the development of Iraqi summering in Lebanon, showing that this practice created social and economic interactions between Iraq and Syria which, in turn, triggered a nationalist reaction from Iraqi intellectuals and officials. The latter sought to develop summering in Iraq in order to prevent Iraqis spending their money abroad. This last case study shows that transdesert mobility intertwined the states surrounding the Syrian Desert and helped shape a regional space, but without undermining national bounded spaces. On the contrary, regional connections sometimes led to a strengthening of state territories and national economies.

Sources

This dissertation relies firstly on French and British consular, military and Mandate archives. These include archival documents from the Foreign Office and the Colonial Office held at The National Archives (Kew, UK) as well as the Indian Office Records (IOR) at the British Library (London, UK). Some IOR documents have also been found on the website of the Qatar Digital Library thanks to its partnership with the British Library. Furthermore, it combines records of the French Mandate in Lebanon and Syria and of French consulates in the region from the Centre des Archives diplomatiques de La Courneuve (La Courneuve, France), and *the Centre des Archives diplomatiques de Nantes* (Nantes, France), complemented by the archives of the French Levant Army held at Service Historique de la Défense (Vincennes, France) and/or accessible in digital form on the website *Mémoire des Hommes.*

These archival records provide ample and detailed information on the development of transdesert mobility, the interactions between state authorities and the transport companies, the permanent insecurity along the Baghdad–Damascus route, Franco-British relationships, and so on. Although these sources convey the perspective of the French and British authorities, they reveal many internal debates and conflicts and thus make it possible to avoid approaching the

Mandate state as 'a unitary actor or monolithic entity'.[112] An attentive and extensive reading of these archives thus offers an almost 'ethnographic' experience of how the colonial state functioned, as Camille Lefebvre puts it, which makes it possible to highlight changes in perspective, trials and tribulations, as well as discrepancies between 'the projects and their implementation'.[113]

Other government archives have complemented these sources, including material from the National Archives and Records Administration (Maryland, USA) and the League of Nations Archives (Geneva, Switzerland), as well as digitised records from the Israel State Archives (Jerusalem, Israel/Palestine).

Secondly, this dissertation draws on another important body of material consisting of press archives, travelogues and memoires. These include the archives of selected Arabic-language Lebanese, Syrian and Iraqi newspapers held in microfilm form at the Jafet Library of the American University of Beirut (Beirut, Lebanon). It is also based on the memoirs and travel accounts of many Arab travellers who followed the Baghdad–Damascus route in the inter-war period, as well as on travelogues of French, British, Swiss, American and German travellers. By contrast, these documents serve to show the adoption of motorised transport by various local and foreign travellers. They reveal some practical aspects of travelling through the Syrian Desert and the Syrian–Iraqi border that do not appear in government sources and give an insight into the travel experience and observations of individuals. In particular, travel narratives can provide insights into how travelling through the Syrian Desert may have changed people's understandings of 'home and away, self and other, familiar and foreign'.[114]

Third, and finally, this dissertation includes three private archive collections. First and foremost, the archives of the British travel agency Thomas Cook & Son (Peterborough, UK), where I was able to research in 2019 shortly before the company went bankrupt and the archives were moved. Secondly, the archives of the Nairn Transport Company held at the Middle East Centre Archive (Oxford, UK), which actually represent a very small collection; and finally, the archives of the Sursock family held at the Université Saint-Esprit de Kaslik (Kaslik, Lebanon).[115]

[112] Darshan Vigneswaran and Joel Quirk, *Mobility Makes* States, p. 29.
[113] Camille Lefebvre, *Frontières de sable, frontières de papier*, p. 29.
[114] Roxanne L. Euben: *Journeys to the Other Shore: Muslim and Western Travelers in Search of Knowledge*, (Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 9–10.
[115] I am deeply grateful to Cyrus Schayegh for sharing with me some records from the Alfred Sursock Archives.

Chapter 0 – A Background of Connectivity

Introduction

In February 1921, the Baghdad-born poet and lawyer Muhammad al-Hashimi travelled from Damascus to Baghdad on his return from several years abroad. In 1913, he had moved to Cairo to study at Al-Azhar University and the Egyptian University. Then, in 1929, he left Cairo for Damascus where he lived for two years.[1] On 15 February 1921, he returned to Baghdad by crossing the Syrian Desert, accompanying a caravan on its way to Tabriz between Damascus and Hit on the Euphrates. He published a three-part account of this journey in the newspaper *Al-Muqtataf* (Beirut/Cairo), which provides an insight into how people moved between Damascus and Baghdad in the early twentieth century.[2]

Muhammad al-Hashimi met a small group of people in Damascus who also wanted to travel to Baghdad. They heard of a camel owner who was about to leave for Tabriz and met him in Meidan Square. After negotiations, they agreed to accompany the caravan across the desert to the Euphrates. On 15 February 1921, the caravan left Damascus and followed an almost direct route through the desert between Dumayr and Kubaysa, the two innermost settlements on either side of the desert. Al-Hashimi recounted the hardship of the journey, the bitter cold and intense thirst, as well as the many storms they endured.[3] On the way, the caravan encountered various Bedouin shaikhs who asked them to pay a tax in exchange for their protection. Although al-Hashimi acknowledged the legitimacy of this passage fee, which resulted from long-standing agreements between camel drivers and tribes, he complained that the Bedouin sought to collect it on many occasions during their journey.[4] After almost a month of travel, the caravan arrived on 12 March 1921 in Hit, from where al-Hashimi completed his journey by car to Baghdad, which he reached the following day.[5]

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[1] Jasim Khalaf Salih, 'Travel literature at Hashemi (His trip from Damascus to Baghdad): study and investigation', *Journal of Al-Frahedis Arts* No. 30 (2017), pp. 375–376; Imiil Ya'qub, *Mu'jam al-shu'ārā' mundhu bad'i 'aṣri al-nahḍa: Book 3* (Beirut: Ṣader, 2009), pp. 1189–1190.

[2] Muhammad al-Hashimi, 'Min Dimashq ilā Baghdād' (1), *Al-Muqtataf* No. 3, 1 September 1921, pp. 250–256; Muhammad al-Hashimi, 'Min Dimashq ilā Baghdād' (2), *Al-Muqtataf* No. 4, 1 October 1921, pp. 353–358; Muhammad al-Hashimi, 'Min Dimashq ilā Baghdād' (3), *Al-Muqtataf* No. 5, 1 November 1921, pp. 474–478. https://archive.alsharekh.org/magazineYears/107 (accessed 16 June 2022)

[3] *Al-Muqtataf* No. 3, 1 September 1921, pp. 250–256.

[4] *Al-Muqtataf* No. 4, 1 October 1921, pp. 353–355.

[5] *Al-Muqtataf* No. 5, 1 November 1921, pp.474–478.

This journey bears witness to the importance of the caravan trade and its persistence after the First World War. It also suggests that, in addition to the caravan traders and their camels, travellers also crossed the desert, joining a caravan to make the long journey in the best possible conditions. Finally, his travel account points out that nomadic groups were important actors in transdesert mobility. At the same time, Muhammad al-Hashimi's account highlighted certain political and technological developments that he saw as signs of a changing world. The Iraqi poet made several references to the presence of British forces that he encountered during his journey. He also mentioned the automobile more than once in his account. On 24 February, for example, al-Hashimi and his companions saw a large car abandoned in the desert, which they identified—or believed to be—one of the cars that had transported British officials from Damascus to Baghdad in late 1919, at the time of the British withdrawal from Bilad al-Sham.[6]

This chapter first outlines the mobility networks that spanned the Syrian Desert in the late Ottoman period, providing a historical background to the development of the Baghdad–Damascus route in the 1920s. Throughout the nineteenth century, caravan traders, camels and few travellers crisscrossed the Syrian Desert, connecting the cities of Bilad al-Sham and Mesopotamia/Ottoman Iraq.[7] Some caravans even continued their journey far into Persia or the Arabian Peninsula, and beyond. After a brief section on the caravan trade in the pre-modern period, the chapter discusses its transformation in the nineteenth century, highlighting recent historical scholarship that has challenged the narrative of a 'decline' of the caravan trade in the late Ottoman period. Until the First Word War (and even afterwards), the networks of caravan

[6] *Al-Muqtataf* No. 3, 1 September 1921, pp. 250, 255.

[7] Since pre-modern times Bilad al-Sham has referred to a socio-geographical area with blurred boundaries between the Mediterranean and the Syrian Desert. Although this region became 'closer knit' in the nineteenth century, Cyrus Schayegh points out, local structures remained predominant throughout this period, far more central to the inhabitants than intra-regional connections. Since ancient times, the term 'Mesopotamia' has referred to the fertile plains of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, a region also known in Arabic as *al-'Irāq* since at least the eight century. Prior to the Ottoman conquest, the latter term was used to refer to the area south of contemporary Iraq. In British documents, 'Mesopotamia' was the most often used term prior to the Mandate period, often in combination with two other terms referring to 'sub-regions': 'Iraq Arabi' referred to the region south of Baghdad, centred on ancient Babylon, before later including the Ottoman provinces of Baghdad and Basra; and 'Jazirah' referred to the land between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, northwest of Baghdad. On Bilad al-Sham, see Cyrus Schayegh, 'On Scales and Spaces: Reading Gottlieb Schumacher's *The Jaulân* (1888)', in Liat Kozma, Cyrus Schayegh and Avner Wishnitzer (eds.), *A Global Middle East: Mobility, Materiality and Culture in the Modern Age, 1880-1940* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), pp. 27–31; Cyrus Schayegh, *The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2017), pp. 3–4, 41–48. See also Dominique Chevallier, 'Consciences Syriennes et Représentations Cartographiques à la Fin du XIXe Siècle et au Début du XXe Siècle', in Thomas Philipp (ed.), *The Syrian Land in the 18th and 19th Century: The Common and the Specific in the Historical Experience* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1992), pp. 1–10. On *al-'Irāq* and Mesopotamia, see Pierre-Jean Luizard, *La formation de l'Irak contemporain : Le rôle politique des ulémas chiites à la fin de la domination ottomane et au moment de la création de l'Etat irakien* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2002), pp. 15–16; Carl Bryant Shook, 'The Origins and Development of Iraq's National Boundaries, 1918-1932: Policing and Political Geography in the Iraq-Nejd and Iraq-Syria Borderlands' (PhD thesis, The University of Chicago, 2018), pp. 75–99; Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 8 (Third edition).

trade forged economic and social connections across the Syrian Desert, providing a 'backdrop of connectivity' against which transdesert mobility developed with greater intensity in the 1920s and 1930s.[8] In doing so, this chapter aims to show the major constraints and limitations on transdesert mobility that prevailed during the late Ottoman period; and to highlight that the development of a car-based transport system in the twentieth century did not, however, mark an essential break with the past.

Second, this chapter traces the beginnings of automobility in the regions surrounding the Syrian Desert.[9] It discussed the development of a market for second-hand military vehicles and new cars after the First World War, and then examines the establishment of paid motorised transport services within and between cities. Finally, the chapter outlines the early use of the car along the caravan routes, showing the way it was adopted in the early 1920s for travel on the Aleppo–Baghdad route and the Aleppo–Deir ez-Zor–Mosul route. It describes the beginnings of transdesert traffic before the inauguration of the direct Baghdad–Damascus route in 1923, thus showing motorised transport as a continuation of pre-existing practices of transdesert mobility.

Caravan Routes in the Late Ottoman Period

From the seventeenth century to the early decades of the nineteenth century, a vast and relatively stable network of caravan trade stretched across the Syrian Desert from the Mediterranean to Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf. The caravan trade linked the cities that

[8] Quote: Lindsey R. Stephenson, 'Rerouting the Persian Gulf: The Transnationalization of Iranian Migrant Networks, c. 1900-1940' (PhD thesis, Princeton University, 2018), p. 2. NB Lindsey Stephenson used this expression to refer to the long-standing economic and social relationships that strongly connected the shores of the Persian Gulf in the early twentieth century.

[9] For studies of the thriving scholarship on automobility in the Middle East, see Frédéric Abécassis, 'La mise en place du réseau routier marocain', in Dominique Avon and Alain Messaoudi (eds.), *De l'Atlas à l'Orient musulman: Aperçu Historique* (Paris: Karthala, 2011), pp. 85–97; Nile Green, 'Fordist Connections: The Automotive Integration of the United States and Iran', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 58:2 (2016), pp. 290–321; Anat Helman, 'Taking the bus in 1920s and 1930s Tel Aviv', *Middle Eastern Studies* 42:4 (2006), pp. 625–640; Simon Jackson, 'Introduction: The Global Middle East in the Age of Speed: From Joyriding to Jamming, and from Racing to Raiding', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 39:1 (2019), pp. 111–115; Simon Jackson, 'Personal Connections and Regional Networks: Cross-border Ford Automobile Distribution in French Mandate Syria', in Jordi Tejel and Ramazan Hakkı Öztan, *Regimes of Mobility: Borders and State Formation in the Middle East, 1918-1946* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), pp. 109–140; Mikiya Koyagi, 'Drivers across the Desert: Infrastructure and Sikh Migrants in the Indo-Iranian Borderlands, 1919–31', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 39:3 (2019), pp. 375–388; Pascal Ménoret, *Joyriding in Riyadh: Oil, Urbanism, and Road Revolt* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Kristin Monroe, 'Automobility and Citizenship in Interwar Lebanon' *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 34:3 (2014), pp. 518–31; Phillipe Pétriat, 'The Uneven Age of Speed'; Mehdi Sakatni, 'From Camel to Truck? Automobiles and the Pastoralist Nomadism of Syrian Tribes during the French Mandate (1920–46)', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 39:1 (2019), pp. 159–169; David Yaghoubian, 'Shifting Gears in the Desert: Trucks, Guilds, and National Development in Iran, 1921–1941', *Jusur: The UCLA Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* No. 13 (1997), pp. 1–36.

bordered the Syrian Desert, such as Aleppo, Damascus, Baghdad, Mosul, Diyarbakır and Mardin, and was itself connected to more distant regional markets.[10] Despite its undeniable importance, the caravan trade was only a small part of the economy of the cities bordering the desert. For Mosul, for example, it was only one of the city's four 'circles of trade' in the mid-nineteenth century, which also included provincial, regional and transnational networks.[11] Other cities, such as Damascus and Aleppo, depended mainly on local and regional trade relations, although parts of their population, especially the 'elite merchants' and their associates, benefited from long-distance and caravan trade.[12] Valuable and even luxury goods such as silk, spices, incense, pearls and ivory formed the core of the caravan trade for centuries.[13]

Until the beginning of the nineteenth century, the caravan trade consisted of a handful of large caravans crossing the desert each year between Mesopotamia and Bilad al-Sham.[14] The average number of camels in the annual caravans was 1,500, but could vary between 600 and 3,000, not counting the smaller caravans that crossed the desert more frequently.[15] Overland trade took place along four main routes. The first connected Aleppo to Baghdad and Basra passing through the oases of the Palmyrena, before reaching Anah and following the Euphrates down to Baghdad. Sometimes called the Great Desert Route, it was followed by the caravans trading between India and Britain on behalf of the East India Company. The second route linked Damascus to Baghdad via Palmyra and Hit, also passing through the oases of the Palmyrena. It was the route followed by the large pilgrim caravans on their way to Mecca. A third route linked Damascus with Hit more directly across the desert, passing through Dumayr, Bir Mulussa and Kubaysa, before joining the Euphrates and the main route to Baghdad. As it crossed the desert where water was scarce, this route was only followed by small caravans and the camel postal

[10] James A. Reilly, 'Regions and Markets of Ottoman Syria: Comparisons and Transformations', *Chronos* No. 10 (2004), pp. 111–144. On the connections of the caravan trade with regional markets in the east/north-east and west/south-west, see Hala Fattah, *The Politics of Regional Trade* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), pp. 1–61; Faruk Tabak, The Waning of the Mediterranean 1550–1870 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), pp. 33–133; Faruk Tabak, 'Economic and Ecological Change in the Eastern Mediterranean, 1550-1850', in Biray Kolluoğlu and Melten Toksöz (eds.), *Cities of the Eastern Mediterranean: From the Ottomans to the Present Day* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010), pp. 23–37.
[11] Quote: Sarah Shields, *Mosul before Iraq: Like Bees Making Five-Sided Cells* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), pp. 95–121, here: p. 95.
[12] Quote: James A. Reilly, 'Regions and Markets of Ottoman Syria', pp. 111–121, here: p. 112.
[13] Charles Issawi, *The Fertile Crescent 1800-1914: A Documentary Economic History* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 224; Sarah Shields, *Mosul before Iraq*, p. 101. See also Christina Phelps Grant, *The Syrian Desert: Caravans Travel and Exploration* (London: A. & C. Black, 1937), pp. 148–153.
[14] The number of caravans who crossed the desert each year varies somewhat from one scholar to another. Christina P. Grant, *The Syrian Desert*, pp. 131–132; James A. Reilly, 'Regions and Markets of Ottoman Syria', p. 113; A. Abdel Nour, 'Le réseau routier de la Syrie ottomane (XVIe-XVIIIe siècles)', *Arabica* 3:3 (1983), pp. 172–173.
[15] Christina Phelps Grant, *The Syrian Desert*, pp. 148–153; Charles Issawi, *The Fertile Crescent, p.* 224; Sarah Shields, *Mosul before Iraq*, pp. 144–145.

service that was established in the nineteenth century. This route was close to the itinerary followed by the caravan of Mohammad al-Hashimi in 1921. Finally, a fourth and northernmost route bypassed the Syrian Desert by going from Aleppo to Birecik in present-day Turkey, then on to Urfa and Mardin, before heading southeast to Mosul and along the Tigris to Baghdad.[16]

Between the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the caravan trade fluctuated according to specific events, such as attacks on caravans, and longer-term historical developments: the integration of the Ottoman provinces into an increasingly 'Eurocentric world economy' and the assertion of Ottoman 'modern state territoriality'.[17] The developments in transdesert mobility during the nineteenth century are discussed below.

Attacks on caravans

Between the 1840s and the 1860s, repeated clashes between caravan traders and Bedouin tribes severely undermined the organisation of caravan trade, which relied on arrangements between these two groups. In 1842 and 1857, the attack and looting of several caravans urged caravan traders to abandon the shorter routes linking Damascus and Aleppo to Baghdad and reroute their caravans to the north. Over the next two decades, Damascus lost some of its importance on the transdesert routes, as trade was mainly conducted via Aleppo, from where the caravans travelled to Mosul.[18] A foreign consular report noted in 1866 that the caravans now followed the route through Aleppo, Diyarbakır, Mosul and Baghdad, taking nearly two months to make the crossing instead of about 20 days by the more direct route.[19] French and British consuls joined forces in trying to restore the movement of caravans by the shortest route between Damascus, Aleppo and Baghdad.[20] In 1866, the French entrepreneur and

[16] For a description of overland trade routes, see Christina P. Grant, *The Syrian Desert*, pp. 161–173, 256; Françoise Métral, 'Changements dans les routes et les flux commerciaux du Désert Syrien 1870–1920: Le sort incertain des oasis du nord de la Palmyrène', in Thomas Philipp and Birgit Schäbler (eds.), *The Syrian Land: Processes of Integration and Fragmentation: Bilād Al-Shām from the 18th to the 20th Century* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1998), pp. 36–37. On the Palmyrena, see also Françoise Métral, 'La steppe de la Palmyrène sous le Mandat français: marginalisation économique, redéploiement des activités entre Alep et le Nord-Est', *Cahiers de Recherche* No. 5 (1996), pp. 43–64; Jean Métral, 'Dans les steppes de la Palmyrène: Nomadisme et mobilités au Proche-Orient', *Les Annales de la recherche urbaine* No. 59–60 (1993), pp. 91–99.

[17] Quotes: Cyrus Schayegh, *The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World*, pp. 34–41. See also James L. Gelvin, 'Was there a Mandates period?', in Cyrus Schayegh and Andrew Arsan (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of the History of the Middle East Mandates* (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 421; James L. Gelvin and Nile Green (eds.), *Global Muslims in the Age of Steam and Print* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), p. 4.

[18] Philippe Pétriat, 'Caravan Trade in the Late Ottoman Empire: the ʿAqīl Network and the Institutionalization of Overland Trade', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 63:1–2 (2018), pp. 38–72; Abdul-Karim Rafeq, 'Damascus and the Pilgrim Caravan', in Leila T. Fawaz and Christopher A. Bayly (eds.), *Modernity and Culture: From the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 138; James Reilly, 'Damascus Merchants and Trade in the Transition to Capitalism', *Canadian Journal of History* 27:1 (1992), pp. 12–13; Sarah Shields, *Mosul before Iraq*, pp. 101–102.

[19] Charles Issawi, *The Fertile Crescent*, p. 247.

[20] James A. Reilly, 'Damascus Merchants and Trade', p. 14.

resident in Beirut Edmond de Perthuis also undertook a seven-month journey across the Syrian Desert to mediate with various tribal shaikhs and bring them back to the negotiating table. He noted in a travelogue that most of the caravans had abandoned the desert route linking Damascus to Baghdad for the past fourteen years.[21]

The fluctuations of the caravan trade in the second half of the nineteenth century were closely connected to the territorialisation process undertaken by the Ottoman state. From the second third of the nineteenth century, the central government in Istanbul undertook a series of administrative and political reforms while carrying out a programme of economic and infrastructural development throughout the empire. These reforms were also coupled with an attempt to reaffirm central authority over the outlying provinces of the empire, the so-called 'frontiers of the state'.[22] In 1831, the Ottoman governor of Aleppo launched a military campaign and conquered the cities of Baghdad, Basra and finally Mosul in 1834, thus putting an end to the rule of 'semi-autonomous' Mamluk governors in the region.[23] Meanwhile, Ottoman governors established barracks and relay stations along the Euphrates to encourage agricultural production and stimulate transdesert trade. The expansion of Deir ez-Zor from a small provincial town to a major commercial centre is illustrative of Istanbul's drive to assert modern state territoriality through the reaffirmation of direct rule and the development of infrastructure. In the following decades, Deir ez-Zor became a crossroads of overland trade routes between Aleppo and Baghdad as well as between Damascus, Palmyra and Mosul, attracting many merchants and craftsmen who grew its population to several thousands.[24]

Meanwhile, the Ottoman state's concern to assert its authority over remote provinces was also reflected in a new attitude towards the nomadic groups, characterised by renewed efforts to sedentarise them.[25] Attempts by Ottoman governors to collect taxes from the Bedouin, to disarm them and to impose conscription on them, provoked tribal discontent. Similarly, new

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[21] Edmond de Perthuis, *Le Désert de Syrie, l'Euphrate et la Mésopotamie* (Paris: Hachette, 1896), p. ix.
[22] Eugene L. Rogan, *Frontiers of the State in the Late Ottoman Empire: Transjordan, 1850–1921* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
[23] Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 13–14.
[24] On the concept of 'modern state territoriality' building on Charles Maier's 'territoriality', see Cyrus Schayegh, *The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World*, pp. 2–27. On Deir ez-Zor, see Jean-Luc Arnaud, 'Entre Istanbul et La Mecque, entre Bagdad et l'Europe, Damas au XIXe siècle', in *Histoire, archéologies, littératures du monde musulman. Mélanges en l'honneur d'André Raymond* (Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 2009), p. 9; Jamal Barout, 'La renaissance de la Jéziré : Deir ez-Zor ottomane, de la désertion à la reconstruction', in Jean-Claude David and Thierry Boissière (eds.), *Alep et ses territoires : Fabrique et politique d'une ville (1868–2011)* (Beirut: Presses de l'Ifpo, 2014), pp. 110–11; Jean Hannoyer, 'Politiques des notables en Syrie : La naissance d'une ville (Deyr al-Zôr, 1850-1921)', *Bulletin d'études orientales* No. 41–42 (1989–90), pp. 113–142; Faruk Tabak, 'Local Merchants in Peripheral Areas of the Empire: The Fertile Crescent during the Long Nineteenth Century', *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 11: 2 (1988), p. 202.
[25] Reşat Kasaba, *A Moveable Empire: Ottoman Nomads, Migrants, and Refugees* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009), pp. 84–122.

measures were taken that deprived nomads of their usual income, for example when governors tried to prevent them from levying taxes on passing caravans and sedentary populations or from raiding other nomadic tribes. As Eugene Rogan has pointed out, 'the combination of reduced revenues and increased taxes could provoke rebellion, particularly in those tribes not favoured with government stipends and titles'.[26] The loss of income, combined with periods of hardship, particularly during droughts, may have played a role in encouraging tribes to attack and loot merchant caravans travelling between Damascus and Baghdad.[27] Thus, Ottoman state territorialisation did not only bring greater security to caravan traders, but also brought disruption to a long-standing system of transdesert mobility. These observations highlight some of the tensions and contradictions inherent in the Ottoman state's process of modernisation and territorialisation in the nineteenth century.[28] At a later stage, Ottoman governors tried to establish new relationships with the tribal leaders and resumed the grant of allowances to some shaikhs to prevent attacks on caravans.[29]

Revisiting the decline of caravan trade

The changing commercial relations of Ottoman cities in the second half of the nineteenth century have received much attention in historical studies of the late Ottoman period. Historians have examined how the development of steam navigation, the growing presence of European merchants in the Ottoman Empire, and the gradual integration of the Middle East into global networks of trade affected local and regional connections. These developments, both internal and external to the Ottoman Empire, led to a 'changing balance of forces' between inland and coastal cities.[30] Beirut, in particular, gained importance over interior cities such as Aleppo and Damascus as its trade relations with European powers developed. Meanwhile, the major economic centres of Aleppo, Damascus and Mosul lost some of their economic importance in the second half of the nineteenth century. Cheap transport to the coast encouraged the import of manufactured goods from Europe which competed with local industry. From the mid-

[26] Eugene L. Rogan, *Frontiers of the State*, p. 190.
[27] Philippe Pétriat, 'Caravan Trade in the Late Ottoman Empire', pp. 50, 57.
[28] For more on this, see Fulya Özkan's dissertation and published articles, including Fulya Özkan, 'Gravediggers of the Modern State: Highway Robbers on the Trabzon-Bayezid Road, 1850s-1910s', *Journal of Persianate Studies* 7/2 (2014), pp. 219–250.
[29] Françoise Métral, 'Changements dans les Routes', p. 33; Philippe Pétriat, 'Caravan Trade in the Late Ottoman Empire', pp. 48–50.
[30] Quote: Leila Fawaz, 'The Changing Balance of Forces between Beirut and Damascus in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries', *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* 55:1 (1990), pp. 208–214.

nineteenth century onwards, the Ottoman inland regions began to specialise in agricultural production rather than manufacturing.[31]

Nonetheless, although Ottoman cities developed increasing trade relations with Europe, they also maintained and even strengthened their local and regional economic relations. James Reilly has shown that, while Ottoman Syria's integration into global circuits of trade was initially detrimental to the economy of its cities, they adapted to the new conditions by reinforcing other kinds of commercial relations. In this respect, the cities of Bilad al-Sham benefited from the achievements of Istanbul's state territorialisation, such as improved transport infrastructure and security, which helped them to strengthen local, regional and interregional ties.[32] Building on James Reilly's work, Cyrus Schayegh has demonstrated that globalisation did not occur at the expense of other forms of integration. On the contrary, in the period from the 1830s to the Second World War, 'cities, regions, states, and global circuits reconstituted and transformed each other much more thoroughly and at a much faster rhythm than at any point in history'—a process that Cyrus Schayegh has defined by coining the term 'transpatialization'. Increased global connections and interactions with the central government did not mean a decrease in regional integration, as these transformations did not operate in a 'zero-sum game'. [33]

What about the caravan trade? The changing nature and importance of transdesert trade during the nineteenth century has been the subject of historiographical debate. According to some historians, the movement of caravans between Damascus/Aleppo and Mosul/Baghdad declined steadily during the nineteenth century and was almost non-existent at the time of the First World War.[34] According to James L. Gelvin, for example, the orientation of Syrian and Iraqi trade in opposite directions in the early twentieth century explain why post-war partition plans treated Syria and Iraq as two separate territories. As he put it, 'the lines that separated the

[31] Ibid.; Charles Issawi, *An Economic History of the Middle East and North Africa* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), pp. 1–43; Roger Owen, *The Middle East in the World Economy, 1800-1914* (London/New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009), pp. 83–99; Frank Peter, 'Dismemberment of Empire and Reconstitution of Regional Space: The Emergence of 'National' Industries in Damascus between 1918 and 1946', in Nadine Méouchy and Peter Sluglett (eds.) *The British and the French Mandates in Comparative Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), pp. 416–417.

[32] James Reilly, 'Damascus Merchants and Trade in the Transition to Capitalism', pp. 1–27; James Reilly, 'Regions and Markets of Ottoman Syria' (2004), pp. 129–144.

[33] Cyrus Schayegh, *The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World*, pp. 34-91. See also one of his earlier articles, Cyrus Schayegh, 'On Scales and Spaces: Reading Gottlieb Schumacher's *The Jaulân* (1888)', in Liat Kozma, Cyrus Schayegh and Avner Wishnitzer (eds.), *A Global Middle East*, pp. 19–54.

[34] For a review of studies suggesting a decline in the caravan trade beginning even before the nineteenth century, see Philippe Pétriat, 'Caravan Trade in the Late Ottoman Empire', pp. 41–43. For two studies suggesting a decline in the nineteenth century, see Jean-Luc Arnaud, 'Entre Istanbul et La Mecque, entre Bagdad et l'Europe, Damas au XIXe siècle', pp.77–94; Philip S. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920-1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 17.

proto-states and the cohesive potential of those states were not entirely based on whim'.[35] Historians have found it difficult to assess the volume of caravan trade in the second half of the nineteenth century due to the lack of statistical data, because the Ottoman customs did not keep track of this movement. Foreign consuls collected data on trade, but only partially, and European sources often did not deal in detail with overland trade, which was of little interest to European merchants.[36]

Nevertheless, several historians have pointed to a certain resilience or persistence of the caravan trade in the late nineteenth century. Faruk Tabak has argued that the main players in transdesert trade were Muslim traders, who managed to maintain their trade relations in the second half of the nineteenth century. According to him, although the size of the caravans decreased, the volume of trade remained significant.[37] Françoise Métral has argued that the increased administrative and military presence of the Ottoman state in the Euphrates valley enabled merchants and travellers to move in greater numbers between Baghdad, Aleppo and Damascus from the 1870s onwards.[38] Sarah Shields has acknowledged some decline in the caravan trade, but agreed that it was still important in the 1880s. [39] More generally, she has shown that Mosul did not suffer much from the integration of the Ottoman Empire into the world economy. The city's provincial, regional, transdesert and long-distance trade did not disappear in the second half of the nineteenth century, leaving only international maritime trade and local trade.[40]

Recently, Philippe Pétriat has argued that the second half of the nineteenth century represented a 'favourable context' for the caravan trade. Through the analysis of petitions sent by traders to the state, he has shown that merchants involved in the caravan trade between Mesopotamia and Bilad al-Sham frequently called on the Ottoman government to prevent tribal attacks and secure the routes. The petitioners emphasised the importance of overland trade to the empire, stressing the 'economic and moral obligations of the state' to them. In addition, Philippe Pétriat has traced the emergence of a well-organised trade network that stretched from Kuwait to the cities of Mesopotamia and Bilad al-Sham, relying on the close interactions of

[35] James L. Gelvin, 'Was there a Mandates period?', p. 423.
[36] On the lack of statistical date, see Roger Owen, *The Middle East in the World Economy, 1800-1914*, pp. 274–278, 287–293; Philippe Pétriat, 'Caravan Trade in the Late Ottoman Empire', p. 43; Halil Inalcik and Donald Quataert, *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire, 1600-1914* (Vol. 2) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 824; Sarah Shields, *Mosul before Iraq*, pp. 114–115.
[37] Faruk Tabak, 'Local Merchants in Peripheral Areas of the Empire', pp. 179–214.
[38] Métral, 'Changements dans les Routes', pp. 38–39.
[39] Sarah Shields, *Mosul before Iraq*, pp. 102, 116.
[40] Ibid., pp. 114–122; 188–189; Sarah Shields, 'Regional Trade and 19th-Century Mosul: Revising the Role of Europe in the Middle East Economy', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 23:1 (1991), p. 29.

their actors to the central government in Istanbul and to the local Bedouin tribes. Their activity and connections point to what he has called the 'institutionalization of overland trade' in the late Ottoman Empire. Combining a qualitative approach and the use of diverse statistics, Philippe Pétriat concluded that transdesert trade between Baghdad and Damascus did not increase in the nineteenth century to the same extent as maritime trade, but that it was nevertheless 'arguably higher in the late 19th century than it was in the 1850s'.[41] As the above mentioned historical studies suggest, the movement of caravans still connected the cities and regions surrounding the Syrian Desert at the beginning of the twentieth century, a fact also confirmed by the movements of some travellers outlined below.

Travelling practices

To provide a comprehensive picture of transdesert connectivity on the eve of the First World War, it is important to discuss transdesert travel practices as well. In pre-modern times, the most massive movement of people through the Syrian Desert was that of hajj pilgrims, who travelled annually from the eastern and northern provinces of the Ottoman Empire towards Mecca. Damascus was a hub of pilgrimage routes, featuring intense economic activity each year during the hajj period. In the nineteenth century, the development of steam navigation massively increased the number of pilgrims travelling to the Hijaz from all over the world, but also changed the experience and the routes of the pilgrimage. Inevitably, it transformed the geography of travel around and through the Syrian Desert as well. Particularly since the 1850s, the traditional pilgrimage caravans that left Baghdad and Damascus annually for the Hijaz tended to disappear, as more and more pilgrims followed the sea routes via the Persian Gulf, the Mediterranean and the Red Sea. By the end of the century, sea travel from Basra to Jeddah in the Hijaz had almost entirely replaced the Mesopotamian caravan. While also losing importance, the caravan from Damascus continued until the last decade of the century, when the construction of a railway line between Damascus and Muzayrib replaced the first stages of the caravan journey.[42] The building of the Hijaz Railway in the first decade of the twentieth

[41] Philippe Pétriat, 'Caravan Trade in the Late Ottoman Empire', pp. 38–72. See also: Philippe Pétriat, 'The Uneven Age of Speed: Caravans, Technology, and Mobility in the Late Ottoman and Post-Ottoman Middle East', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 53:2 (2021), pp. 273–290.

[42] Luc Chantre, 'Voie de terre contre voie de mer : Réseaux consulaires et pèlerinage à La Mecque au XIXe siècle' in Gaëlle Tallet and Thierry Sauzeau, *Mer et désert de l'Antiquité à nos jours: Approches croisées* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2018), pp. 245–260; Sylvia Chiffoleau, *Le Voyage à La Mecque : Un pèlerinage mondial en terre d'Islam* (Paris: Belin, 2015), pp. 216–218; Nile Green, 'The Hajj as its Own Undoing: Infrastructure and Integration on the Muslim Journey to Mecca', *Past & Present* 226:1 (2015), pp. 193–226; Eileen Kane, *Russian Hajj: Empire and the Pilgrimage to Mecca* (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 2015), pp. 18–83; Francis E. Peters, *The Hajj: The Muslim Pilgrimage to Mecca and the Holy Places* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 271–298 ; James A. Reilly, 'Regions and Markets of Ottoman Syria', p. 118.

century attracted some pilgrims back to Damascus. Between 1909 and 1913, several thousand pilgrims travelled by rail each year from Damascus. However, the lack of trains, the interruption of the line in Medina (which was never extended to Mecca) and frequent attacks by Bedouin constrained the use of the railway.[43] On the eve of the First World War, the Ottoman provinces surrounding the Syrian Desert had ceased to be the scene of massive pilgrimages by land. However, small groups of travellers continued to cross the desert.

For most of these travellers, it was customary to join the first caravan to leave, thus adapting to the route and schedules of the caravan traders. Only the most affluent could afford to hire their own small caravan.[44] In the late Ottoman period, the sons of relatively wealthy families frequently moved to a nearby large city to study, often even to one of the civilian and military schools in Istanbul. Born in Mosul in 1885, Jaafar al-Askari first studied at the Military School in Bagdad, then travelled to Istanbul in 1901 to enrol in the Royal Military College. In his memoirs, he recounted his month-and-a-half journey from Baghdad to Alexandretta with a caravan.

> Like all travel in the Ottoman Empire in those days, the journey from Baghdad to Constantinople was exceedingly arduous. People used to journey by mule and horse, carrying all their tents, equipment, provisions and other paraphernalia with them. The route followed the Euphrates, with each stage of the journey lasting eight to twelve hours, i.e. a full day's march.[45]

Khalid 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Qassab was another important figure from Baghdad who went to Istanbul to study. Born in 1882, he travelled to Istanbul in June 1901 in a caravan assembled by his family, which consisted of 14 horses and a donkey. The young man travelled to Aleppo also with a family friend and an Iranian merchant. In his memoirs, al-Qassab recounted the various stages of his journey, the many stopovers at inns along the way, the two-day halts in Ramadi and Deir ez-Zor for the beasts of burden to rest, and the heat that forced them to travel

[43] Kaïs Ezzerelli, 'Le pèlerinage à La Mecque au temps du chemin de fer du Hedjaz (1908-1914)', in Sylvia Chiffoleau and Anna Madœuf (eds.), *Les pèlerinages au Maghreb et au Moyen-Orient : Espaces publics, espaces du public* (Beirut: Presses de l'Ifpo, 2005), pp. 167–191; Murat Özyüksel, *The Hejaz Railway and the Ottoman Empire: Modernity, Industrialisation and Ottoman Decline* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), pp. 184–189; Ernest Weakley, *Report upon the conditions and prospects of British trade in Syria: Presented to both Houses of Parliament by Command of Her Majesty* (London: HMSO, 1911), p. 79

[44] Christina Phelps Grant, *The Syrian Desert*, p. 175; Thomas Philipp, 'Highways and Sea Lanes in Southwest Syria: Bilād Al-Shām from the 18th to the 20th Century', in Thomas Philipp and Birgit Schäbler (eds.), *The Syrian Land*, p. 9.

[45] William Facey and Najdat Safwat (eds.), *A Soldier's Story: From Ottoman Rule to Independent Iraq, The Memoirs of Jafar Pasha Al-Askeri (1885-1936)* (London: Arabian Publishing, 2003), p. 18.

at night. After 24 days, the caravan reached Aleppo, from where al-Qassab continued his journey to Alexandretta and then by boat to Istanbul where he arrived after 36 days of travel.[46]

Michael Provence has shown that the journey to Istanbul was a special event in the life of these young men.[47] For many young men of the 'last Ottoman generation', going to study in the capital was a formative experience. Coming from provincial cities such as Baghdad, Damascus and Jerusalem, as well as from rural areas, the young men entered the 'state system' through military and civilian education in Istanbul. After graduation, Ottoman civil servants and military personnel were usually sent to different cities in the empire. Their travels from city to city helped build connections between Ottoman provinces in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[48]

Istanbul was not the only destination motivating a journey through the Syrian Desert. Students and religious figures in search of knowledge (*ṭalab al-ʿilm*) crossed the desert to other destinations.[49] This is illustrated, for example, by the travel account of Muhammad al-Hashimi, mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. Another example is that of Muhsin al-Amin, who was born in 1867 in Jabal Amel, in present-day Lebanon, where he grew up and received his first religious education. In 1891, he left his village in the company of a renowned ulema to go to Najaf, where he intended to continue his studies like many Shiite clerics. His journey took him from Beirut by boat to Alexandretta, then in a horse-drawn carriage to Aleppo, before continuing with muleteers who had come from Baghdad with pilgrims and were looking for travellers so as not to return unloaded.[50]

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[46] Khalid 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Qassab, *Mudhakkirāt 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Qaṣṣāb* (Beirut: Al-mu'assasa al-'arabiyya li-l-dirāsa wa-l-nashr, 2007), pp. 40-54.

[47] Michael Provence, *The Last Ottoman Generation and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 28.

[48] Ibid., pp. 26–45.

[49] In the late Ottoman period, medical students from the districts of Mosul and Baghdad travelled to Beirut to study at the Syrian Protestant College, see Chantal Verdeil, 'Naissance d'une nouvelle élite ottomane. Formation et trajectoires des médecins diplômés de Beyrouth à la fin du xixe siècle', *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* No. 121–122 (2008), here: p. 225. On travel in search of knowledge, see Abderrahmane El Moudden, 'The ambivalence of rihla: community integration and self-definition in Moroccan travel accounts, 1300-1800', in Dale F. Eickelman and James Piscatori (eds.), *Muslim Travellers: Pilgrimage, Migration and the Religious Imagination* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 69.

[50] Muhsin al-Amin, *Riḥlat Muḥsin al-Amīn* (Beirut: Dār al-Ghadīr, 2001); Muhsin al-Amin, *Autobiographie d'un clerc chiite du Jabal 'Âmil*, translation and comments by Sabrina Mervin and Haïtham al-Amin (Damas: Institut français de Damas, 1998).

FIGURE 3: CROSSING THE DESERT IN A CARAVAN

Image credit: Keystone-Mast Collection, UCR/California Museum of Photography, University of California, Riverside. Photograph by Meiss-Teuffen. Title: 'Crossing the Syrian Desert - Caravan from Bagdad on Trial to Mediterranean. Hit, Mesopotamia. Asia' (public domain)

In conclusion, the movement of goods and people across the Syrian Desert underwent significant transformations during the nineteenth century as a result of local, regional and global factors. Undoubtedly, the cities surrounding the Syrian Desert witnessed an intensification of their commercial relations with the ports of the Mediterranean, the Persian Gulf and the Black Sea. Furthermore, the importance of caravan trade for cities such as Aleppo, Damascus, Mosul and Baghdad certainly diminished in comparison to the other forms of trade on which they relied. Nevertheless, transdesert connections did not evolve in a linear and regular way during the long nineteenth century. While fluctuating according to long-term dynamics (the development of steam navigation, integration into a global economy, and Ottoman state territorialisation) and historical events (attacks on caravans) these connections did not always follow the same pattern, sometimes weakening but also strengthening at other times. On the eve of the First World War, the large caravans of the pre-modern era had disappeared, but smaller yet more frequent caravans continued to move between Damascus, Aleppo and Baghdad. Likewise, travellers crossed the desert for study, work or military service and pilgrims continued to travel by land for part of their journey to Mecca. In short, transdesert mobility had not been severed.

At the same time, movement through the Syrian Desert remained severely limited by the considerable travel time, logistical difficulties and harsh travel conditions. The journey between Damascus or Aleppo on the one hand, and Mosul or Baghdad on the other, took between 20 and 30 days depending on the season and the hazards of travel, sometimes requiring up to 2 months when the caravans had to pass through Diyarbakir and Mosul. Moreover, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, caravans only left for the desert journey every two months or so.[51] Wealthy travellers could assemble their own caravan, but this took time and money. In any case, crossing the desert remained a difficult undertaking, as the descriptions given in travellers' accounts and memoirs testify. Moreover, transdesert mobility was confined to the movement of trade caravans, pilgrims and (often wealthy) travellers driven by practical motivations (study, work, military service). In sum, the cities of Bilad al-Sham and Ottoman Iraq were connected to some extent, but transdesert connectivity remained tenuous.

In the early twentieth century, some entrepreneurs set up transport services by horse-drawn carriages. From 1902 onwards, a coach service operated between Aleppo and Baghdad more or less regularly depending on the period. When the service was not in operation, stagecoaches could be hired for the journey. As early as 1907, another company offered a transport service for goods and people between Aleppo, Deir ez-Zor and Baghdad, using coaches accompanied by soldiers and guides provided by the Ottoman government.[52] This points to a growing commercialisation of transdesert transport at the beginning of the twentieth century, which would intensify further in the 1920s and 1930s.

Incipient Automobility

The first cars appeared in the cities of Bilad al-Sham and Mesopotamia in the early twentieth century. In his history of automobile trade in the Middle East, Eyad Abu Shakra has pointed out that historical sources do not agree on the date of the first importation of cars, but that it took place between 1904 and 1908. On the Mediterranean side of the desert, Howard Bliss—the President of the Syrian Protestant College (later renamed the American University of Beirut)—and Michel Sursock were among the first to own a car in Beirut. On the Iraqi side, one of the first was Hamdi Basha Baban, who brought it by driving from Aleppo to Baghdad

[51] Ernest Weakley, *Report upon the conditions and prospects of British trade in Syria*, pp. 27–43.
[52] Jamal Barout, 'La renaissance de la Jéziré', p. 117; Charles Issawi, *The Fertile Crescent*, pp. 219, 265. See also Ra'uf al-Bahrani, *Mudhakkirāt Ra'ūf al-Baḥrānī, lamaḥāt 'an waḍ' al-'Irāq mundhu ta'sīs al-ḥukm al-waṭanī 'ām 1920 wa-li-ghāyat 'ām 1963* (Beirut: al-Mu'assasa al-'arabiyya li-l-dirāsa wa-l-nashr, 2009), pp. 19–23.

across the desert. Despite these scattered early uses, the motorisation of transport began mainly during and after the First World War.[53]

Second-hand and 'flat-pack' cars

The Great War created favourable conditions for the expansion of motorised transport in several ways. First, it provided an incentive for various road-building projects to facilitate the transport of troops and supplies.[54] The Ottoman authorities and foreign armies built drivable roads between the main cities.[55] The war also gave Ottoman governors some leeway to carry out public works at a faster pace.[56] Between 1914 and 1918, the road network around Damascus was greatly expanded and improved.[57] Later, after defeating Faysal's Arab forces in July 1920, the French continued the road-building enterprise. In this respect, the archives of the French *Armée du Levant* [hereinafter French Levant Army] in Vincennes shed light on military efforts to develop the Syrian road network between 1920 and 1924.[58]

Second, the First World War brought to the Middle East a large number of motor vehicles that later became available for civilian use. In June 1916, the British Indian forces in Iraq equipped themselves with a mechanical transport division which grew over the following months as new vehicles were unloaded at the port of Basra. Inadequate maintenance caused extensive damage to vehicles until the end of the war, forcing troops to frequently abandon them in the field.[59] Car wrecks became an increasingly common sight in the areas occupied by foreign armies. Nile Green has highlighted the stark contrast between the small number of cars plying on Iranian roads in the early 1920s and the many 'motor cemeteries' that stretched across the country, 'filled with remnants of the thousands of American cars and trucks used by the

[53] Eyad Abu Shakra, *Warā al-miqwad ʿalā durūb al-mashriq al-ʿarabī* (place unknown: General Motors, 2006), pp. 1–39. See also Edward F. Nickoley, 'Transportation and Communication', in Said B. Himadeh (ed.), *Economic organization of Syria* (Beirut: American Press, 1936), p. 186; Ernest Weakley, *Report upon the conditions and prospects of British trade in Syria*, p. 131.

[54] Robert Blecher, 'Desert Medicine, Ethnography, and the Colonial Encounter in Mandatory Syria', in Nadine Méouchy and Peter Sluglett (eds.), *The British and the French Mandates*, p. 256; Jacob Norris, *Land of Progress: Palestine in the Age of Colonial Development, 1905-1948* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 63–64; Cyrus Schayegh, *The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World*, p. 100.

[55] Centre des Archives diplomatiques de La Courneuve [hereinafter: CADC], 48CPCOM42, 'Note sur la route Khanikin-Téhéran', 25 October 1923.

[56] Cyrus Schayegh, *The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World*, p. 122.

[57] Edward F. Nickoley, 'Transportation and Communication', p. 178.

[58] For example, Service historique de la Défense, Vincennes [hereinafter: SHD]/GR 4 H 181/2, 'Correspondance, rapports et comptes rendus relatifs aux crédits nécessaires pour la construction des routes, renseignements, construction et travaux routiers', July 1919–June 1924; SHD/GR 4 H 181/2, file No. 2, Report by Goybet (French Levant Army), Damascus, 9 April 1921.

[59] F. W. Leland, *With the M.T. In Mesopotamia* (Uckfield: The Naval and Military Press, 2004) (1st edition 1920). See also Colonial Office, S*pecial report to the Council of the League of Nations on the progress of Iraq during the period 1920-1931* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office 1931), p. 137.

British forces'.[60] In 1919, when the British army withdrew from Bilad al-Sham, some officers drove Ford cars from Damascus to Baghdad via Deir ez-Zor, but had to abandon a vehicle that broke down on the way, after stripped it of some parts. All that remained was a chassis, which later became a landmark helping motorists to find their way through the desert.[61]

In the wake of the war, the French and British armies began to reorganise their motor transport divisions in search of greater efficiency, thereby responding to the growing demand for cost savings coming from France and Britain. At the head of the British Colonial Office, Winston Churchill strove to reduce expenditure in Iraq and Palestine.[62] The French army received similar orders. The need to cut costs prompted the military authorities to introduce strict restrictions on the use of cars, petrol and spare parts.[63] As a memorandum by General Garnier Duplessix of the French Levant Army stated on 8 March 1921, turning off the engines of stationary cars had become a gesture of considerable value.[64] Simultaneously, British and French armies sought to dispose of their surpluses by selling cars and trucks to local buyers, as evidenced by the records of U.S. consuls in Syria and Iraq. In the early twentieth century, U.S. consular officials in Aleppo and Baghdad corresponded extensively with car, tyre and small parts manufacturers in the United States who were considering expanding their markets in the Middle East. According to the U.S. vice-consul in charge in Aleppo, the 'first automobile trucks were introduced into the district during the war, when some excess military trucks were sold to local buyers and used on the Alexandretta-Aleppo road to handle freight'.[65] A report by the U.S. consul in Baghdad indicated that 200 cars were registered in Mosul in 1923, the majority of which had been brought in during the war by the British army, which then sold or simply abandoned them.[66] The same was true for Baghdad, as the Iraqi engineer Naji Sha'shu'

[60] Nile Green, 'Fordist Connections: The Automotive Integration of the United States and Iran', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 58/2 (2016), p. 301.
[61] Timothy R. Nicholson, *The Wild Roads: the Story of Transcontinental Motoring* (London: Jarrolds Publishers, 1969), p. 215.
[62] Peter Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq: Contriving King and Country* (London/New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), p. 40. See also Roger Adelson, 'British and U.S. use and misuse of the term 'Middle East'", in Michael E. Bonine, Abbas Amanat and Michael Ezekiel Gasper (eds.), *Is There a Middle East: The Evolution of a Geopolitical Concept* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2011), p. 42.
[63] SHD/GR 4 H 179/2B, Memorandum ('Note de service'), French Levant Army, Beirut, 12 December 1920; SHD/GR 4 H 179/3(a), *Ministère de la Guerre, 3ème Bureau bis* to General Garnier Duplessix (Chief Commander of the French Levant Army), Paris, 26 January 1920 https://www.memoiredeshommes.sga.defense.gouv.fr/ (p. 150/274) (accessed 29 June 2022).
[64] SHD/GR 4 H 170/1, Memorandum by General Garnier Duplessix (Chief Commander, Levant Army), Beirut, 8 March 1921 https://www.memoiredeshommes.sga.defense.gouv.fr/ (p. 122/325) (accessed 29 June 2022).
[65] The National Archives and Records Administration [hereinafter: NARA], Record Group 84, Consular Posts, Aleppo, vol. 126: U.S. vice-consul Altaffer to Robins Company (Detroit), Aleppo, 5 March 1926.
[66] NARA, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Asia, 1910–1929, microfilm roll 22, File 890g.50: Report on 'Motor Cars, Roads, Travel & Soils in the Mosul & Kirkuk Areas of Iraq' by John Randolph (U.S. consul, Baghdad), 22 January 1924.

explained to the newspaper *Al-Bilad* in 1930. According to him, it was only after the British army took Baghdad that numerous vehicles appeared in the streets of the city. When the war ended, the British sold their vehicles at knock-down prices and Baghdadis started buying cars.[67]

The same happened in Iran when British forces withdrew after the coup led by Zia'eddin Tabataba'i in 1921.[68] There were also British army vehicle depots in Palestine, where local buyers purchased cars after the war, some even coming from Beirut to do so, like the car agent Audi.[69] The French army was much smaller and did not have as many vehicles. Nevertheless, it also sought to resell second-hand vehicles, not least to buy equipment more suited to the army's needs. In 1921, for example, the French Levant Army managed to commission the Lebanese entrepreneur Michel Gemayel to sell 300 army trucks to the Iranian government.[70] In July 1926, moreover, the U.S. vice-consul in charge in Aleppo noted that the army had sold cheap French-made trucks that were very popular in the district.[71]

While second-hand army cars and vans were among the first vehicles to be purchased after the war, the car trade also began to flourish in the 1920s. The import of U.S. branded cars grew rapidly, in far greater proportions than French, Italian, German and British brands. In particular, Ford, Dodge, Buick and Cadillac cars found a large market in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq.[72] The local agents of the car manufacturers played an important role in the development of motorised transport throughout the post-Ottoman lands. In Beirut, several local entrepreneurs such as Charles Corm, Ibrahim Saad and Francis Kettaneh became key figures in the automobile market. In Baghdad, some Iraqi Jewish entrepreneurs became representatives of car manufacturers such as General Motors, Chevrolet and Ford.[73]

One of the most influential figures in the car market was the Lebanese Charles Corm who became Ford's agent and began importing vehicles from 1921. Between 1920 and 1934,

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[67] American University of Beirut [hereinafter: AUB], 'Muḥāḍara 'an al-siyyāra fī-l-'Irāq wa-l-'ālam' *al-Bilad*, 8 April 1930; The National Archives [hereinafter: TNA], CO 730/162/5, Memorandum by J. Ramsay Tainsh (Director of the Iraqi Railways) regarding road and railway competition in Iraq, 30 June 1930. See also 'Abbas Baghdadi, *Li'allā nansā: Baghdād fī-l-'ishrīnāt* (Beirut: Al-mu'assasa al-'arabiyya li-l-dirāsa wa-l-nashr, 1998), p. 148.

[68] TNA, FO 371/10831, unknown informant to Albert Stern, Iraq, 8 September 1925.

[69] TNA, FO 371/10092, British Consul General to Department of Overseas Trade, Beirut, 6 June 1924.

[70] Houchang E. Chehabi and Hassan I. Mneimneh, 'Five Centuries of Lebanese-Iranian Encounters' in Houchang E. Chehabi (ed.), *Distant Relations: Five Centuries of Lebanese–Iranian Ties* (Oxford [etc.]: Centre for Lebanese Studies, 2006), p. 27.

[71] NARA, Record Group 84, Consular Posts, Aleppo, vol. 126, U.S. vice-consul Alling, to Rocky Mountain Steel Products, Inc., Aleppo, 28 July 1926.

[72] TNA, FO 371/10092, British Consul General to Department of Overseas Trade, Beirut, 6 June 1924; NARA, Record Group 84, Consular Posts, Baghdad, vol. 87, Note on 'Motor vehicle preferences in Iraq' by John Randolph, (U.S. consul), Baghdad, 29 January 1927.

[73] Franck Salameh, *Charles Corm: An Intellectual Biography of a Twentieth-Century Lebanese "Young-Phoenician"* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015), pp. 1–19; Eyad Abu Shakra, *Warā al-miqwad ʿalā durūb al-mashriq al-ʿarabī*, pp. 39–62.

he managed to establish a 'commercial empire' that extended across the French Mandate and beyond, based on a solid reputation for quality and the adaptation of standard Ford models that his company imported. The vehicles unloaded from the ships in the port of Beirut in spare parts were reassembled but also transformed to meet local needs and particular demands.[74]

FIGURE 4: BUS STOP, BAGHDAD (1933–1934)

Image credit: Swiss National Library, SLA-Schwarzenbach-A-5-03/236. Creator: Annemarie Schwarzenbach (Wikimedia Commons).

Collective motor transportation

Although only a relatively well-off and urban segment of the population could buy a car for private use in the post-war years, the number of vehicles registered in the French and British

[74] Quote: Simon Jackson, 'Personal Connections and Regional Networks: Cross-Border Ford Automobile Distribution in French Mandate Syria', in Jordi Tejel and Ramazan Hakkı Öztan (eds.), *Regimes of Mobility*, pp. 109–133, here: p. 109.

Mandate territories steadily increased in the early 1920s.[75] The development of motorised travel was partly a consequence of the emergence of paid, collective passenger transport. In Aleppo, the number of vehicles increased slowly after 1919 and reached 700 cars and a few dozen of trucks by 1926. As the U.S. consul pointed out, private use of cars was quite rare, as most vehicles were used to transport people and goods. Transport contractors merely used old cars inside Aleppo and new cars for interurban transport.[76] The same configuration prevailed in Damascus, where a few hundred cars were in circulation in 1925, mostly for the transport of people and goods.[77] Motorised transport also developed in Baghdad (Figure 4), where the U.S. consul noted in 1926 that, although statistics of registered vehicles were subject to great variation, it could be considered that about 890 cars, vans and motorbikes were present in the district of Baghdad.[78]

Likewise, interurban transportation developed in the early 1920s, as more and more garage and car owners took on passenger transport. Traffic increased steadily between the different Syrian, Lebanese and Palestinian cities, at least during the dry season from May to November. Taxi services linked coastal cities such as Latakia, Tripoli, Beirut and Haifa with inland cities such as Aleppo, Damascus and Jerusalem.[79] On some sections, competition between the various contractors was already serious in the early 1920s.[80] In 1922, a dozen garages in Beirut dealt with repairs, offered cars for hire and operated passenger transport services.[81] In 1925, all major and smaller towns in the French Mandate were equipped with a garage.[82] In the main cities, taxis departed from a central square which was known as the meeting point for cars engaged in the transport business. In Beirut, for example, taxis were

[75] NARA, Record Group 84, Consular Posts, Aleppo, vol. 120, U.S. vice-consul Keeley to John N. Willys Export Corporation (Ohio, USA), Damascus, 23 January 1925; Consular Posts, Aleppo, vol. 126, U.S. vice-consul Alling to Rocky Mountain Steel Products, Inc., Aleppo, 28 July 1926.
[76] Ibid.; NARA, Record Group 84, Consular Posts, Aleppo, vol. 126, U.S. Consulate to F. H. Canaday (United States Advertising Corporation), Aleppo, 21 May 1926.
[77] NARA, Record Group 84, Consular Posts, Aleppo, vol. 120, U.S. vice-consul Keeley to John N. Willys Export Corporation (Ohio, USA), Damascus, 23 January 1925.
[78] NARA, Record Group 84, Consular Posts, Baghdad, vol. 86, U.S. consul Randolph to Ford Motor Company d'Italia (Trieste, Italy), Baghdad, 30 September 1926. See also A. C. Bailward, 'The Baghdad-Aleppo motor Route', *Journal of the Central Asian Society* 10:3 (1923) p. 245; Said Himadeh, *Al-niẓām al-iqtiṣāḏī fī-l-'Iraq* (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1938), pp. 307–309.
[79] John Munro, *The Nairn Way: Desert Bus to Baghdad* (New York: Caravan Books, 1980), pp. 29–32; Cyrus Schayegh, *The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World*, pp. 157–158; Cyrus Schayegh, 'The Many Worlds of Abud Yasin', pp. 287–289. See also CADC, 50CPCOM313, 'Rapport sur la situation et la valeur économiques de la Syrie et du Liban', Frenhc High Commission in Syria and Lebanon, Beirut, 8 July 1922.
[80] NARA, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Asia, 1910-1929, microfilm roll 16, File 890d.797: Report on 'Autobus passenger transportation' by U.S. consul, Damascus, 26 August 1922.
[81] Unknown author, *Ce que tout Français doit savoir de la Syrie et du Liban* (Paris: Emile Larose, 1922), p. 22.
[82] CADC, 50CPCOM358. 'Notice sur l'automobilisme en Syrie et au Liban', attached to letter from French High Commissioner Sarrail to Foreign Affairs, Beirut, May 1925.

assembled at the *Place des Canons* (later known as Martyrs' Square), while in Damascus, cars arrived and left the city from Marjah Square.[83] Commercial motorised transport continued to be common practice in the 1920s. As the French-language newspaper *Le Commerce du Levant* noted in 1930 about Syria and Lebanon, 'only 20% of the cars currently on the road [were] driven by their owners'.[84] In the same way, in Iraq, entrepreneurs offered collective transport services between the various cities. From Baghdad, travellers to Mosul could travel by train to the railway terminus in Shergat, from where collective taxis took them on to Mosul. Taxis also run between Mosul and Kifri, northeast of Baghdad as well as between other cities and villages of Iraq. It was even common for individuals who bought a car to offer transport on their first trip home. For example, Mosul residents who purchased a car in Baghdad would pick up passengers on the way home to cover some of the customs and transport costs.[85]

The development of collective motorised transport was a salient feature of Middle Eastern automobility that historians should not overlook. In her insightful study of automobility in interwar Lebanon, Kristin Monroe has focused on the individual travel practices of the Lebanese elite and French colonial administrators, showing that the car maintained and even reinforced certain power relations.[86] However, Monroe's perspective tends to suggest that there was only one form of automobility in Lebanon, namely that of a local and colonial elite moving around the country in private cars. As she has argued, 'the automobile was, by its nature, individualistic and aristocratic' and those who drove a car sought pleasure and leisure rather than fulfilling 'utilitarian purposes'.[87] Such an approach disregards the other forms of motorised travel that developed in the same period in Lebanon, but also elsewhere in the region. In my view, motorised transport developed in the Middle East in the form of collective and paid transport simultaneously, not successively, with private use of the car for leisure and performance purposes.[88] As will be seen later, motorised transport between Iraq and Syria also developed mainly in the form of collective transport during the interwar period.

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[83] Anne-Marie Bianquis, 'Transports en commun et aménagement dans l'agglomération de Damas au XXe siècle', *Bulletin d'études orientales* No. 47 (1995), p. 41; Cyrus Schayegh, 'The Many Worlds of Abud Yasin', p. 287; Muhammad Thabit, *Jawla fī rubū' al-sharq al-adnā* (Cairo: al-Nahḍa al-Miṣriyya, 1934), p. 42.
[84] AUB, 'La circulation automobile en Syrie', *Le Commerce du Levant*, 28 February 1930, p. 2.
[85] NARA, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Asia, 1910–1929, microfilm roll 22, File 890g.50: Report on 'Motor Cars, Roads, Travel & Soils in the Mosul & Kirkuk Areas of Iraq' by John Randolph (U.S. consul, Baghdad), 22 January 1924.
[86] Kristin V. Monroe, 'Automobility and Citizenship in Interwar Lebanon', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 34:3 (2014), pp. 518–531.
[87] Ibid.
[88] In his book, Gijs Mom's book unpacks the 'toy-to-tool myth' that has permeated scholarship on 'automobilism' in the United States and Europe, according to which its expansion followed an evolution from recreational and sportive use of cars to their utilitarian. Gijs Mom, *Atlantic automobilism: Emergence and Persistence of the Car, 1895-1940* (New York: Berghahn, 2015), pp. 1–58. See also Jennifer Hart's book on automobility in Ghana, which

Automobiles on caravan routes

In the aftermath of the First World War, the return to greater freedom of movement and security led to the resumption of caravan trade and travel across the Syrian Desert.[89] The caravans followed the routes they had been taking for some decades between Damascus, Aleppo, Mosul and Bagdad. At the same time, some people started to cross the desert by car as well, following the tracks of the caravans. Transdesert traffic emerged as an extension of Ottoman practices of transdesert mobility.[90]

From 1921 onwards, discussions took place between the French and the British to ensure the safety of caravans between Deir ez-Zor and Mosul so that trade between the two cities could resume. That year, however, numerous attacks on the merchants who tried their luck prevented the official opening of the route.[91] In July 1922, the French Captain Coux, the British Divisional Advisor Flaxman and the Mutasarrif of Mosul decided to establish escorts to accompany the caravans between Mosul and Deir ez-Zor twice a month. Correspondence related to this agreement reveals that cars occasionally travelled between the two cities along the caravan route. The Franco-British agreement took account of this new mode of travel. It stipulated that, as the safety of travellers in cars could not be ensured by escorts on horseback due to their speed, they were advised to join the escorted caravan when crossing the dangerous sections of the route.[92] For a short time, the arrangements between the French and British police had a positive effect on traffic between Mosul and Deir ez-Zor. During the summer months of 1922, many cars from Baghdad travelled on this route. Travellers were able to hire automobiles in

describes the emergence of 'a form of popular mobility' in the British Gold Coast in the early decades of the twentieth century, based on public and commercial transport rather than the private car. Jennifer Hart, *Ghana on the Go: African Mobility in the Age of Motor Transportation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), pp. 11–12, 29–63.

[89] In reality, the war did end transdesert mobility, but it replaced some movements and routes with others. For example, many caravans crossed the desert to carry supplies for Ottoman troops, which the British sought to prevent through the imposition of a blockade with the help of tribal allies. However, the 'normal routes' of caravan trade were disrupted. Robert S. G. Fletcher, 'The ʿAmārāt, their Sheikh, and the Colonial State: Patronage and Politics in a Partitioned Middle East', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 58:1–2 (2015), pp. 172–173; Anthony B. Toth, 'The Transformation of a Pastoral Economy: Bedouin and States in Northern Arabia, 1850-1950' (PhD thesis, University of Oxford, 2000), pp. 117–120.

[90] As the British consul in Aleppo noted in 1930, after travelling by car between Aleppo, Deir ez-Zor, Ain-Ghazal and Mosul, he had followed 'the original caravan track, as it [offered] water facilities'. TNA, FO 424/633, 'Memorandum respecting a journey to Mosul by Acting Consul Meade', attached to letter from Consul Meade t0 A. Henderson, Aleppo, 12 July 1930.

[91] Middle East Centre Archive, Oxford [hereinafter: MECA], Leonard Nalder Collection (GB 165-0216), Administration Report of the Mosul Division for 1921 by L.F. Nalder.

[92] TNA, FO 371/7851, Statement signed by Coux and Flaxman, Mosul, 31 July 1922, enclosed in letter from British High Commission Cox to Winston Churchill, Baghdad, 18 August 1922; CADN, 1SL/1/V/588, 'Compte rendu détaillé des travaux de la conférence d'El Qaim', 23 May 1923.

Aleppo and Baghdad for the journey.[93] A British official who followed this route on his way from Baghdad to London in August gave an account in *The Baghdad Times*, with details of the journey and the cost of transport and accommodation.[94]

Meanwhile, cars travelling between Baghdad, Aleppo and Damascus began to take a different route as well. From Baghdad, they followed the Euphrates via Ramadi, Abu Kemal and Ana before reaching Deir ez-Zor without making a detour via Mosul.[95] At the end of 1921, Laird Archer, a U.S. citizen on a mission in Iraq for the Near East Relief, travelled by this route from Baghdad to Aleppo with his wife and a photographer. He noted in a memorandum that he had not been able to obtain any information on travel conditions along the Euphrates, but as the route via Mosul was closed due to 'British bombing activities', they had been forced to use that route. The group found two Arab drivers who had come from Aleppo in Ford cars and 'were anxious to return, with profit, before winter closed the passage entirely'.[96] Laird Archer was therefore able to negotiate a lower price than during the summer season. The trip took six days due to the weather conditions, whereas it would have taken three days in the dry season. Once in Deir ez-Zor, they met a convoy of six cars carrying French soldiers on their way to France and joined them for the rest of the journey to Aleppo.[97]

In 1922, these two routes were used alternately between Baghdad and Aleppo, but the Euphrates route gradually took precedence over the Mosul route, not least because of the highly variable security on the latter. Indeed, the protective measures taken by the French and British armies failed to achieve lasting results. The bad reputation of the Mosul route led travellers to pass through Ramadi when travelling between Iraq and Syria.[98]

The expansion of motorised transport attracted the interest of various entrepreneurs. In 1922, the garage Rauf Hattab & Co of Mosul provided transport with Ford vans and Talbot tourers from the rail station of Shergat (Iraq) to Mosul, Deir ez-Zor and Aleppo, with

[93] TNA, FO 371/7851, Bourdillon (Secretary to the High Commissioner for Iraq) to Department of Overseas Trade, Baghdad, 26 October 1922.
[94] Global Press Archive, 'Baghdad to London: Route via Aleppo and Beirut', *The Baghdad Times*; 11 November 1922. https://gpa.eastview.com/crl/mena (accessed 16 June 2022).
[95] Ibid.
[96] NARA, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Persia, 1910-1929, microfilm roll 32, File 891.00/1235, Memorandum Report to Near East Relief, drawn up by Laird Archer, New York, 8 January 1922.
[97] Ibid.
[98] LON, R58/1/17502/30195, report on the Administration of Iraq, April 1922–March 1923, pp. 42–44; Report on the Administration of Iraq, April 1923–December 1924, p. 42; TNA, FO 371/9013, British Consul Palmer to the Marques Curzon of Kedleston, Damascus, 24 August 1923.

connections to Europe.[99] At the time, there was no regular transport service along the Euphrates route, but travellers could rent a car in either city or even hire a driver for the journey. A company was also running lorries between Aleppo and Deir ez-Zor during the summer months.[100] Moreover, two brothers offered a transport service on demand between Baghdad and Aleppo. In Baghdad, travellers could apply to the 'Aleppo Line Garage', where the first brother organised convoys of cars to Aleppo when enough passengers showed up, at a price of 30 pounds per passenger. In Aleppo, the other brother ran the 'Baghdad Mosul Garage', which provided a similar transport service to Baghdad or Mosul. The journey took four and a half days in winter (one day less in summer), with night stops in the main cities and villages along the way.[101] In Aleppo, a certain George 'Aziza ran a garage bearing his name, which was an old khan transformed into a garage.[102] One of his relatives, Salim 'Aziza, later took over the business and proposed in January 1924 a passenger service between Aleppo and Baghdad in 3 to 4 days, including stopovers with food and water in the company's garages located in Deir ez-Zor, Abu Kamal, Ramadi and Baghdad.[103]

On 4 July 1923, the High Commissioner for Iraq, Henry Dobbs, wrote to the Secretary of States for the Colonies to inform him of recent developments concerning the transdesert routes linking Iraq to the Mediterranean. He noted that, in May 1923, 751 people had travelled by car along the Baghdad–Ramadi–Deir ez-Zor–Aleppo route, compared to 289 in January of the same year. He also pointed out that another route was 'in the process of being opened up': it ran from Baghdad to Ramadi before cutting directly across the desert to Damascus. In his view, this new route, which could reduce travel time between Baghdad and Damascus, required the full attention of the Iraqi and Syrian governments.[104] In the following months, travellers continued to move between Syria and Iraq via Aleppo or Deir ez-Zor, but the direct Baghdad–Damascus route gradually took over and would eventually become the main route between the two countries.

[99] Global Press Archive, 'Baghdad to London: Route via Aleppo and Beirut', *The Baghdad Times*; 11 November 1922; see also the advertisement in the issue of 25 August 1922. https://gpa.eastview.com/crl/mena/ (accessed 16 June 2022).
[100] Bl, IOR/R/15/1/382, File 23/15, 19 I (D 89), Report on the 'Route Baghdad to London via Aleppo and Beirut', British Legation, Tehran, 1 June 1923.
[101] TNA, FO 684/1/23/1, Secretariat of the High Commissioner for Iraq to Department of Overseas Trade, Baghdad, 7 February 1923.
[102] Najwa 'Uthman, *Al-naql al-dākhīlī fī-l-qarn al-'ishrīn* (Aleppo: unknown publisher, 2004), p. 225.
[103] AUB, 'Al-safar ilā Baghdād', *Lisan al-Hal*, 19 January 1924, p. 2.
[104] TNA, FO 684/1/23/1, British High Commissioner Dobbs to Secretary of State for the Colonies, Baghdad, 4 July 1923.

Conclusion

In early 1922, a group of bursary students from Baghdad travelled via the sea route to Beirut to begin their studies at the Syrian Protestant College. The six students left Baghdad, filled with a certain 'awe at the length of the coming journey', in the words of the British advisor to the Iraqi Ministry of Education, and travelled first to Basra, where they embarked on 30 January 1922 for Bombay. From there they continued by boat via the Red Sea and the Suez Canal until they finally reached Beirut after a journey of about three weeks.[105]

By the end of the same year, the early development of motorised transport across the Syrian Desert offered alternative travel possibilities. In the autumn of 1922, Ahmad Susa—who later became a well-known Iraqi engineer and writer—left Baghdad for the Syrian Protestant College in Beirut. As he recounted in his memoirs, he thought that the quickest route was to travel via Mosul and Aleppo, following the 'desert route' (*ṭarīq al-ṣaḥrā*). After contacting acquaintances in Mosul, his family learned that another young man from that city was about to leave for the Syrian Protestant College as well. Ahmad Susa thus left for Mosul to meet his travelling companion, with whom he rented a Cadillac and began the trip to Aleppo on 5 September 1922, with a driver and a Bedouin guide.[106] His journey shows that new travel opportunities were arising for the inhabitants of Baghdad and its surroundings.

This chapter has outlined the historical background of transdesert connectivity against which motorised transport developed in the early 1920s, showing that this was not an outright break with pre-existing practices, but rather a continuation of Ottoman patterns of mobility. In addressing the early development of motorised transport, and especially its adoption along the caravan routes, this chapter aimed to connect the practices of transdesert mobility of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The perspective adopted in this preliminary chapter serves to underline that the regions surrounding the Syrian Desert were already (or still) connected by trade and travel networks in the early twentieth century. Although specific events and macro-historical developments affected the caravan trade during the nineteenth century, it did not disappear. As will be seen later, these patterns of mobility played an important role in shaping the development of transdesert mobility in the interwar period.

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[105] AUB, Jafet Memorial Library, Archives & Special Collections, Student Life 1882-1980s (AA:4.3), Box 1, File 2: Iraqi students, 1922–1923: James Somerville (Ministry of Education, Iraq) to Professor Nickoley (American University of Beirut), Baghdad, 2 February 1922; M. Fanell (Iraqi Ministry of Education) to the President of the American University of Beirut, [no date].
[106] Ahmad Susa, *Ḥayātī fī niṣf qarn* (Baghdad: Dār al-shu'ūn al-thaqāfiyya al-'āma, 1986), pp. 121–122.

Part I – The Formation of the Baghdad–Damascus Route

The development of the Baghdad–Damascus route and its adoption as the main corridor between Syria and Iraq did not happen overnight. The expeditions led by the first transport entrepreneurs across the Syrian Desert in 1923 lasted several months until they determined a suitable route. In the following years, two different routes coexisted between Damascus and Ramadi, on the Euphrates, one crossing the desert almost directly, the other making a diversion via Palmyra. In addition, some people had plans to open another transdesert route linking Baghdad to Haifa. The study of the formation of the Baghdad–Damascus route undertaken in this first part brings out these alternative routes through the desert and the reasons for their success or ultimate abandonment, sometimes also for their later resurgence. More generally, attention to the process by which the Baghdad–Damascus route took shape can illuminate dynamics, actors and issues at stake that would otherwise go unnoticed. The chapters in Part I of this dissertation raise a number of questions concerning the formation of the Baghdad–Damascus route. What historical agents influenced its early development? To what extent did they promote or hinder transdesert mobility? How did state and non-state actors interact during this process?

Specifically, this first part addresses these questions by examining the formation of a new transport system between Damascus and Baghdad (Chapter 1), the organisation and regulation of traffic due to the prevailing insecurity (Chapter 2), and the evolution of the transport business sector (Chapter 3). By examining the beginnings of the Baghdad–Damascus route from these viewpoints, this first part throws light on the cross-border and transimperial dimension of the Baghdad–Damascus route, its causes as well as its consequences on the connectivity of the regions surrounding the Syrian Desert. This first part does not approach transdesert mobility as mere movements 'between departure and arrival points', thus disregarding the space in between; rather, it considers it as movements shaped by the infrastructure, the actors and their practices as well as the materiality of the space that lay between Damascus and Baghdad.[1]

As the editors of *Infrastructures and Social Complexity* point out, infrastructures are unlikely to 'function according to the plans of *anyone* in particular', as the form they take is the

[1] Quote: David Lambert and Peter Merriman, 'Empire and Mobility: An Introduction', in David Lambert and Peter Merriman (eds.), *Empire and Mobility in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), p. 7.

result of 'multiple agents with competing interests and capacities'.[2] This dissertation interrogates this assertion with respect to the development of the transport system underpinning the Baghdad–Damascus route. It does so by considering the role that various human and non-human factors played in shaping the transport system, thus questioning the influence of automotive technology alone. Furthermore, this first part discusses the role of the Mandate powers in the establishment of the Baghdad–Damascus route. Admittedly, the development of large-scale infrastructure was a tool for empire- and state-building throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[3] And, indeed, French and British imperialism in the Middle East was a major incentive for the development of transdesert traffic. In the following three chapters, however, this dissertation questions whether French and British officials were able to steer the development of the Baghdad–Damascus route to serve their own interests. Overall, the chapters in Part I aim to highlight the interlocking of socio-political, technological and environmental forces that contributed to the formation of the Baghdad–Damascus route.

This first part is also concerned with the interactions between actors who sought to benefit from the development of the Baghdad–Damascus route. Several questions guide this investigation. Did the transport entrepreneurs operate independently, or did they seek state support? And were they subject to French and British pressure? How did states, transport contractors and nomadic groups interact? The chapters also investigate how the development of a cross-border route influenced the relationship between the post-Ottoman states. Did the Mandate powers and local governments in Syria and Iraq work together to promote the development of the route, or did they instead maintain a competitive relationship? The three themes of this first part—the formation of the transport system, the organisation of traffic and the transport sector—provide an opportunity to explore inter-state relationships arising from the development of the Baghdad–Damascus route.

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[2] Penny Harvey, Casper Bruun Jensen and Atsuro Morita, 'Introduction: Infrastructural complications', in Penny Harvey et al. (eds.), *Infrastructures* and *Social Complexity: A Companion*, eds. Harvey et al. (London/New York: Routledge, 2017), p. 10. Original emphasis.

[3] Daniel R. Headrick, *The Tools of Empire: Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981). For further work on the importance of infrastructure to empires, see Peter H. Christensen, *Germany and the Ottoman Railways: Art, Empire, and Infrastructure* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2017); T.G. Otte and Keith Neilson, *Railways and International Politics: Paths of Empire, 1848-1945* (London: Routledge, 2012); John Perry, 'A Shared Sea: The Axes of French and British Imperialism in the Mediterranean, 1798–1914', in James R. Fichter (ed.), *British and French Colonialism in Africa, Asia and the Middle East*, pp. 113–130; Frithjof Benjamin Schenk, 'Mastering Imperial Space? The Ambivalent Impact of Railway Building in Tsarist Russia', in Jörn Leonard and Ulrike von Hirschhausen (eds.), *Comparing Empires. Encounters and Transfers in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), pp. 60–77.

Finally, in studying the formation of the Baghdad–Damascus route, the chapters in Part I also shed light on the scale and speed of mobility that developed across the desert. In other words, while investigating the factors that stimulated the development, intensification and acceleration of transdesert mobility, the chapters examine the potential impediments to mobility, disruptions to the transport system and dangers. The travel experiences of individuals, outlined in this first part through the study of travel accounts, suggest that the desert crossing was not exempt from difficulties, hardships and risks. The following chapters interrogate these aspects of mobility in order to provide insight into the actual conditions under which people moved between Syria and Iraq. In addition, they examine how the different actors sought to meet the challenges and respond to the dangers; and how their actions influenced transdesert mobility.

Chapter 1 – Building the Transport System: Environment, Empires and Technology

> When the next history of the Near East is written it is to be hoped that the historian will devote at least a chapter to the tale of the conquest of the Syrian desert by the motor-car.[1]

Introduction

A few years after exploratory trips undertaken in 1923 in search of a direct route between Damascus and Baghdad, motor traffic between the two cities had become well established. Every week, several convoys of cars and vans crossed the desert in both directions, carrying mail, passengers and small shipments of goods. In addition to many self-employed drivers, several companies operated a regular transport service across the Syrian Desert. The journey from Baghdad to Beirut, and in the reverse direction, took three days, with two nights spent in the desert. Travelling east to west, the convoys left Baghdad, more or less following the caravan route as far as Ramadi on the Euphrates before branching off and proceeding straight across the desert towards Damascus. Between the banks of the Euphrates and the oasis of Damascus, the cars plied desert tracks over a distance of nearly 700 kilometres. By the end of 1926, a fortified post had been built at Rutbah Wells, offering travellers a much-appreciated stopover halfway across the desert.

Between 1923 and 1927, commercial transport developed at a rapid pace along this direct route. Shortly after the inauguration of the transdesert service in October 1923, various postal administrations of European countries began to take an interest in the potential creation of an overland route, which offered significant time savings in the delivery of mail to Central and South Asia compared with the sea route via the Suez Canal. By the end of 1925, despite significant costs incurred as a result of high taxes, Great Britain, Germany, Italy, France and even the United States decided to send their mail to Iran and India, for example, overland via Beirut and Baghdad.[2] An increasing number of people also began to use the Baghdad–

[1] MECA, Nairn Transport Company Collection, 'To Baghdad by Motor', *The Times*, 3 May 1926.
[2] CADC, 48CPCOM42, High Commissioner Weygand to the French Foreign Minister, 16 April 1924; NARA, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Asia, 1910–1929, microfilm roll 16, File 890d.71/1: U.S. Consul Knabenshue to the U.S. Secretary of State, Beirut, 28 May 1924; LON, R28/1/4284/51764, French Mandate over Syria, 2nd Administrative Report for 1925.

Damascus route to travel between Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, sometimes as one segment of a far-reaching journey spanning considerable distances. Traffic along this route grew from a few dozen passengers per month at the beginning of 1924 to a monthly average of several hundred passengers by the end of the year.[3] By 1927, the Baghdad–Damascus route had emerged as the most popular route between Syria and Iraq, outpacing, by far, the Aleppo–Baghdad and Aleppo–Mosul routes in terms of traffic. That year, 2,150 cars and light trucks and about 9,300 passengers travelled between the two cities in both directions. By 1928, these figures had respectively reached approximately 4,220 vehicles and 18,040 passengers.[4] This traffic amounted respectively to monthly averages of 180 vehicles and 775 passengers in 1927 and 350 vehicles and 1,500 passengers in 1928. However, the traffic volume varied greatly from month to month. Behind these rising numbers, there was also a considerable diversity of profiles and travel motivations among travellers, which I examine more specifically in Part II of this dissertation. To provide just a few examples here, the Baghdad–Damascus route was used every year by pilgrims travelling to and from Mecca; by students travelling to the American University of Beirut or to the religious schools of Najaf and Karbala; by foreign and local merchants looking for new markets; by tourists and summer visitors; by government and Mandate state officials; by journalists, writers and artists; by refugees; and by a host of ordinary travellers. Freight transport, however, remained limited although it steadily increased.

Camel caravans continued to cross the desert alongside automobiles and would do so throughout the interwar period. As Philippe Pétriat has recently shown, the caravan trade was particularly resilient during these years and, its eventual disappearance was primarily due to territorial restructuring during the post-Ottoman era rather than to competition from motorised transport.[5] That said, transdesert connectivity was profoundly transformed during the 1920s. Within a few years, the development of the Baghdad–Damascus route had led to the diversion of much of the existing regional movement, resulting in the intensification and diversification of mobility across the Syrian Desert. This chapter traces the formation of the infrastructural system that enabled increasing movements of cars, people, goods and much more across the

[3] SHD/GR 4 H 71/3, French delegation in Damascus, quarterly reports of the *Contrôle Bédouin* for the 1st and 3rd quarters of 1924; TNA, FO 684/1/24/14, acting British consul to the Department of Overseas Trade, Damascus, 6 November 1924.

[4] TNA, FO 684/7/34/3, Memorandum on Transdesert Traffic by Frank H. Todd, attached to a letter from British Consul, Mackereth, Damascus, 26 April 1934; TNA, FO 424/632, British Consul Satow to the High Commission for Palestine, Beirut, 16 April 1929; LON, R2307/6A/4361/536, French Mandate over Syria and Lebanon: Report on the Administration of these Territories for the Year 1927, p. 107.

[5] Philippe Pétriat, 'The Uneven Age of Speed: Caravans, Technology, and Mobility in the Late Ottoman and Post-Ottoman Middle East', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 53:2 (May 2015), pp. 273–290.

desert.[6] Transdesert mobility was contingent on various components of a system that cannot simply be reduced to its technical or material dimensions.[7] The transport system that developed along the Baghdad–Damascus route comprised an assemblage of a material structure (vehicles, tracks, bridge, and buildings), transport operators (transport companies and drivers) and shared knowledge (about the desert, the location of wells, reliable routes etc.).[8] This chapter examines the forces and actors that helped to shape the development of this transport system and argues that environmental conditions played a major role in this process. Applying this perspective, it interrogates the narrative of conquest associated with the development of motorised transport in the Syrian Desert, as illustrated in the opening quote of this chapter and discussed below.

The narrative of conquest

The expansion of motorised traffic across the Syrian Desert fuelled a narrative of imperial and technological conquest that has endured to the present day. The development of transdesert routes was perceived by the French and British primarily as a means of political and economic expansion. The French saw the new Baghdad–Damascus route as '*une grande voie de pénétration asiatique*' ('a great pathway into Asia') that would give France access to new markets in Iran, while strengthening relations between metropolitan France and French Indochina.[9] The British regarded the Baghdad–Damascus route as the 'new land route to the East', as confirmed in numerous articles endorsing the British imperial discourse that were

[6] This chapter owes much to an article by Mikiya Koyagi, titled 'Drivers across the Desert: Infrastructure and Sikh Migrants in the Indo-Iranian Borderlands, 1919–31', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 39:3 (2019), pp. 375–388. This article drew my attention to the existing literature on infrastructure and systems.

[7] Following Thomas Hughes, many scholars have taken up and further developed the notion of a system, particularly within mobility studies. A few examples included Paul N. Edwards, 'Infrastructure and Modernity: Force, Time, and Social Organization in the History of Sociotechnical Systems' in Thomas J. Misa, Philip Brey and Andrew Feenberg (eds.), *Modernity and Technology* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2003), pp. 185–225; Penny Harvey, Casper B. Jensen and Atsuro Morita (eds.), *Infrastructures and Social Complexity: A Companion* (London: Routledge, 2016); Thomas P. Hugues, *Networks of Power: Electrification in Western Society, 1880–1930* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); John Urry, *Mobilities* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), pp. 12–16. See also David Lambert and Peter Merriman (eds.), *Empire and Mobility in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), pp. 9–10.

[8] These categories stem from Brian Larkin's suggestion that infrastructure should be understood in terms of three types of components: 'built things, knowledge things, or people things.' See Brian Larkin, 'The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42:1 (2013), p. 329.

[9] CADC, 48CPCOM42, 'Notice sur une nouvelle route en Orient (de la Syrie à la Perse)', January 1924; High Commissioner Weygand to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Aley, 6 August 1924; Paul Gentizon, 'Beyrouth–Téhéran', *France–Perse: Bulletin Officiel du Groupe d'Etudes Economiques* 1:1 (1924), p. 1. For further details on the new connections with Indochina, see 'Informations diverses', *L'Eveil économique de l'Indochine* No. 373, 3 August 1924 ; 'D'Indochine en France par la Mésopotamie', *L'Eveil économique de l'Indochine* No. 493, 21 November 1926.

published in the 1920s in the *Journal of The Royal Central Asian Society*.[10] For Lieutenant-Colonel Crockek, for example, the Baghdad–Damascus route was one of the chains that bound the British Empire together, with Baghdad as a hub.[11] In addition to this narrative of military and commercial conquest, the development of the Baghdad–Damascus route gave rise to another triumphalist discourse.

The expansion of motorised transport between the two cities was described by many actors at the time as the automobile's conquest of the desert. In November 1924, *The Graphic* noted: 'The motor-car is ubiquitous. To all parts of the world it is penetrating.' [12] In September 1926, an article published in *The Commercial Motor* titled 'The Conquest of the Syrian Desert' reported that two New Zealand entrepreneurs, the Nairn brothers, had successfully overcome the hardships of the Syrian Desert and established a regular transport service, thus demonstrating the ability of modern technology to cope with environmental constraints:

> This feat of conquering the difficulties and hardships of desert transport constituted one more striking proof of the remarkable advances which are taking place throughout the world. The large passenger vehicle is proving its capabilities in no uncertain manner, and the development of the chassis with six, or perhaps, even more wheels is opening out a wonderful vista of possibilities for the future.[13]

Similar views were conveyed recurrently in the writings of French and British Mandate administrators as well as those of foreign transport entrepreneurs and press commentators.[14] The same image of nature being tamed by innovative entrepreneurs and their technology has

[10] On the role of the Royal Central Asian Society, see Robert S. G. Fletcher, *British Imperialism and 'The Tribal Question*' (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 19–66; Nile Green, 'New Histories for the Age of Speed: The Archaeological–Architectural Past in Interwar Afghanistan and Iran', *Iranian Studies* 54:3–4 (2021), pp. 363–365.

[11] H. E. Crockek, 'The Trans-Desert Routes to the East', *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society* 16:3 (1929), p. 359. See also Major McCallum, 'The Discovery and Development of the New Land Route to the East', *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society* 12:1 (1925), pp. 43–67; Captain F. Kingdon Ward, 'The Overland Route from China to India', *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society* 14:3 (1927), pp. 213–226; C. Dalrymple Belgrave, 'The Overland Route to the Persian Gulf', *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society* 18:4 (1931), pp. 560–563.

[12] MECA, 'The New Carpet of Baghdad: By Motor Across the Lone & Level Sands', *The Graphic*, 20 November 1924 (Document No. 20).

[13] CADC, 48CPCOM43, 'The Conquest of the Syrian Desert,' reprinted from *The Commercial Motor*, 7 September 1926.

[14] MECA, Nairn Transport Company Collection, newspaper cuttings: 'To Baghdad by Motor', *The Times*, 3 May 1926 (Document No. 44), 'The Modern Caravan: Wheels across the Desert', *The Times*, 2 January 1934 (Document No. 72) and 'Le rôle de M. Norman Nairn dans la conquête du Désert syrien', *Le National*, 30 August 1927 (Document No. 67); Thomas Cook Archives [hereinafter: TCA], 'A New Era in Desert Travel', *The Traveller's Gazette* 77:11 (November 1927), p. 7; SALT Research, Nairn Transport Company, 'Motor Transport across the Syrian Desert: Damascus–Baghdad'. https://archives.saltresearch.org/handle/123456789/13850 (accessed 16 January 2021); René la Bruyère, 'La route de Bagdad', *Le Journal de Genève*, 6 February 1927. https://www.letempsarchives.ch/page/JDG_1927_02_06/1 (accessed 24 January 2021); Edgar W. Knight, 'By Motor across the Syrian Desert', *The High School Journal* 16:3 (March 1933), p. 94.

continued to inform historical and popular narratives on the expansion of motorised transport between Syria and Iraq up to the present.[15]

These narratives about road building and route making reflect historically constructed perceptions and beliefs. They stem from a particular way of thinking that can be traced back to the Enlightenment in Europe (during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) but also to the Nahda in Arab-speaking regions (during the nineteenth century). These two periods of intellectual ferment gave rise to new conceptions of historical development, henceforth seen as linear and progressive rather than as cyclical. They also instilled confidence in the capacity of human societies to shape the future, to achieve social and economic progress through science and technical innovation and to master non-human nature. This 'high-modernist ideology', as James Scott has termed it, inspired state programmes dedicated to social engineering and the transformation of natural environments.[16] The expansion of European imperial powers opened up a new field for the application and development of these ideas. The narrative of 'technocratic developmentalism' provided a justification for colonialism and other forms of imperial rule, including French and British trusteeship in the Mandate states.[17] Moreover, in the Middle Eastern and North African contexts, Colonial (Western) representations of the environment fostered this view, as Dania K. Davis has shown. A colonial 'environmental imaginary' of Middle Eastern landscapes as once prosperous, but now inhospitable and deficient due to human action, which had prevailed since the nineteenth century, had very concrete consequences in the early twentieth century:

> The consequent need to "improve," "restore," "normalize," or "repair" the environment provided powerful justifications for innumerable imperial projects, from building irrigation

[15] Alice Boustany Djermakian, *Une saga libanaise: La famille Kettaneh* (Beirut: La Revue Phénicienne, 2016), p. 57; Albert Hourani, *Histoire des peoples arabes* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1993), p. 447; T. R. Nicholson, *The Wild Roads: The Story of Transcontinental Motoring* (London: Jarrolds, 1969), p. 215.

[16] Quote: James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 4. See also Katrin Bromber et al., '"The Possibilities are Endless": Progress and the Taming of Contingency', *ZMO Programmatic Texts* No. 9 (2015), pp. 5–6; David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford, Cambridge Mass.: Blackwell, 1990), p. 249. On the influence of the Nahda on the development of conceptions of history as progressive as well as developmentalist aspirations among Arab thinkers, see Jacob Norris, *Land of Progress: Palestine in the Age of Colonial Development, 1905-1948* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 18–23; Sherene Seikaly, *Men of Capital: Scarcity and Economy in Mandate Palestine* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), pp. 15–17.

[17] Priya Satia, 'Developing Iraq: Britain, India and the Redemption of Empire and Technology in the First World War', *Past & Present* 197:1 (2007), pp. 211–255; Priya Satia, '"A Rebellion of Technology": Development, Policing, and the British Arabian Imaginary', in Diana K. Davis and Edmund Burke III (eds.), *Environmental Imaginaries of the Middle East and North Africa* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2011), 23–59. See also On Barak, *On Time: Technology and Temporality in Modern Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press 2013), pp. 4–5.

> systems to reforestation activities to the bombing of "unruly" tribes to the sedentarization of nomads as a measure to prevent "overgrazing."[18]

The colonies and mandate territories also provided a testing ground for new technologies, ideas of development and visions of the future. As Jacob Krais has shown in his study of motor racing in colonial Algeria and Libya, these two colonies became 'laboratories of modernity and experimentation grounds of progress', where the French and Italians could experiment with the limits of technological innovations.[19] Colonial administrators drew a close association between technology, progress and the conquest of nature: 'The car, especially motor sports, seemed to promise the best of modernity, a more secure world where even the harshest of environments would be domesticated.'[20]

A few months prior to the 1923 exploratory expeditions through the Syrian Desert, motorists had crossed the Sahara, seeking to establish a practicable route. Between December 1922 and January 1923, the French automobile manufacturer, Citroën, organised an expedition from Touggourt to Timbuktu, with the aim of confirming the suitability of its Autochenille cars for negotiating a sandy terrain. In the view of French administrators and industrialists, the Citroën expedition proved that the car could forge straight routes across a desert that had previously posed an insurmountable obstacle, thus demonstrating the possibility of 'mastering nature through mechanical power'.[21] Consequently, the motorised transport service that entrepreneurs established across the Syrian Desert in late 1923 was perceived by French and British observers as a continuation of the Saharan expeditions and as further proof that modern technology could conquer hostile environments.[22]

Towards a different story

The narrative of conquest assigns sole credit to human action and technology for the development of motorised transport, thereby denying the possibility that environmental factors and ecological processes could also be historical agents. Taking its cue from environmental history, this chapter argues that the environment was not simply a natural setting into which a

[18] Diana K. Davis, 'Introduction. Imperialism, Orientalism, and the Environment in the Middle East: History, Policy, Power, and Practice', in *Environmental Imaginaries of the Middle East and North Africa*, pp. 1–22.
[19] Jacob Krais, 'Mastering the Wheel of Chance: Motor Racing in French Algeria and Italian Libya', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 39:1 (2019), p. 143.
[20] Ibid., p. 152.
[21] Andrew Denning, 'Mobilizing Empire: The Citroën Central Africa Expedition and the Interwar Civilizing Mission', *Technology and Culture* 61:1 (2020), pp. 49–55. For an example of this narrative, see Alfred Guignard, 'La pénétration transsaharienne par l'automobile', *Revue des Deux Mondes* 24:31 (1924), pp. 583–606.
[22] Jean Damase, 'Une route nouvelle vers la Perse : Beyrouth-Bagdad-Téhéran', *Revue des Deux Mondes* 28:1 (1925), p. 182; MECA, Nairn Transport Company Collection, 'With the Mail Across the Desert', newspaper clipping #22.

technological system was inserted. Over the past few decades, the development of this field of study has advanced understanding of the interactions between human and non-human nature. Since the 1980s, environmental history has profoundly invigorated historical scholarship by revealing multiple ways in which the environment and human societies have been co-constructed.[23] By introducing the environment as an analytical construct within historical analysis, environmental history has illuminated different historiographical traditions, in particular, the history of technology. Having cast aside technological determinism, historians have come to analyse technology, society and the environment 'as fundamentally entangled and intertwined', as Sara B. Pritchard has put it. Environmental history, Pritchard argues, has overcome antagonistic visions of the environment and technology that have informed narratives such as 'the progress story of technology's successful conquest of nature' and 'the declensionist tale of technology's detrimental environmental effects'.[24]

Building on this scholarship, this chapter's aim is not to identify decisive environmental causes; rather, it is to consider their interactions with other forces. In other words, the chapter demonstrates the interweaving of environmental, socio-political and technological factors, which co-produced the infrastructural system, enabling mobility between Baghdad and Damascus. As I will show, the conditions of the desert terrain facilitated the development of motorised transport by rendering the construction of road infrastructure unnecessary, while also placing constraints on the transporters and severely testing their equipment, which ultimately imposed limitations on the traffic flow. The terrain also frustrated French and British ambitions of creating an outlet for their respective automotive industries. Furthermore, as a result of seasonal rainfall and flooding, the transdesert transport system remained in a precarious state during most of the interwar years. This chapter offers preliminary evidence of the arguments developed throughout Part I of this dissertation, firstly, on the role of the Mandate states and non-state actors in the development of the Baghdad–Damascus route, and their capacity to benefit from them, and, secondly, on the scale and speed of the mobility that developed along

[23] Alfred W. Crosby, 'The Past and Present of Environmental History', *The American Historical Review* 100:4 (1995), pp. 1,177–1,189; Andrew C. Isenberg, 'Introduction: A New Environmental History' in Andrew C. Isenberg (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 1–20; Fabien Locher and Grégory Quenet, 'L'histoire environnementale : Origines, enjeux et perspectives d'un nouveau chantier', *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 56 :4 (2009), pp. 7–38; Alan Mikhail, 'Introduction: Middle East Environmental History: The Fallow between Two Fields' in Alan Mikhail (ed.), *Water on Sand: Environmental Histories of the Middle East and North Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 1–25.

[24] Sara B. Pritchard, 'Toward an Environmental History of Technology' in Sara B. Pritchard and Andrew C. Isenberg (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 227–258, quotes: pp. 231, 235. See also Sara B. Pritchard and Carl A. Zimring, *Technology and the Environment in History: Nature and Technology in History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020), pp. 1–16.

this route. Consideration of environmental factors makes it apparent that the operation of the transport system did not correspond to the expectations and hopes of any of the actors who were interested in its development. Furthermore, while the infrastructural system of the Baghdad–Damascus route significantly enhanced transdesert mobility, this mobility was also subject to frequent disruptions, resulting in delays for drivers and travellers, breakdowns and the risk of being stranded.

The Pioneers behind the Wheel

On 3 March 1923, the French consul in Bagdad, Mr Maigret, and a British official of the Iraqi Public Works Department (PWD), Mr Drury, accompanied the Iraqi merchant Muhammad al-Bassam and his drivers on a three-day trip across the desert. The party left Baghdad at 4 p.m. that day and reached Damascus at 12.10 p.m. on 6 March, after spending one night in Ramadi and two more nights in the desert. As recorded by Mr Drury in his report, the exact driving time was 20 hours and 23 minutes. The trip marked the first time that a Mandate administrator had driven through the desert on an almost direct route that avoided Deir ez-Zor. It was not, however, the first time that cars had crossed this part of the desert, as the report acknowledged, referring to al-Bassam's drivers. Mr. Drury wrote: 'The drivers of the Lancia cars state that they have done the trip in just over 17 running hours.'[25] A few days earlier, the French consul in Baghdad had, in fact, noted the arrival in the city of a car coming from Damascus, owned by Muhammad al-Bassam, and had wired the High Commission in Beirut, stating his intention of accompanying al-Bassam's the driver on the return journey.[26]

The merchant who knew the desert

Hajj Bassam, as he was known by some, was a member of a very influential family of 'Aqil traders, whose activities extended from the Arabian Peninsula to Bilad al-Sham and Mesopotamia as well as to the shores of the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. Originally from 'Unayzah (now in Saudi Arabia), Muhammad al-Bassam had settled in Damascus where he was engaged in the caravan trade across the desert. In addition, this powerful merchant carried out many other activities whenever opportunities arose. In the early twentieth century, for

[25] TNA, FO 684/1/23/1, 'Report on Journey by Motor Car over the Direct Desert Route, Baghdad to Damascus', March 3 to March 6, 1923, drawn up by Drury (chief stores officer, Iraqi Public Works Department).
[26] CADC, 48CPCOM42, telegram from French Consul Maigret to the French High Commissioner, Baghdad, 1 March 1923.

example, he provided camels for construction work on the Hijaz Railway.[27] During the First World War, he also offered his services to the Ottoman army, on whose behalf he transported large sums of money across the Syrian Desert and further afield to Yemen. In this way, he participated in the wartime movement of caravans across the desert, which was aimed at supplying the Ottoman troops at a time when the British forces were attempting to impose a blockade to prevent transdesert trade.[28]

After the war, however, al-Bassam appeared to be more supportive of the British, or rather, more willing to collaborate with them, as indicated by a memorandum drawn up by the British consul in Damascus in 1921, which recorded information about important notables, officials and religious dignitaries in Syria. Consul Palmer described al-Bassam as follows: 'Considered pro-British, and helped our prisoners of war and interned persons—even to escape. Reputed not to care about politics, but only about commerce.'[29] Indeed, al-Bassam was able to make the most of every situation. Between 1922 and early 1923, he began to smuggle gold from Damascus to Baghdad, where—taking advantage of the differences in the exchange rates between the Syrian and Iraqi currencies—he could sell it at a profit. At that time, the transport of gold had become an illicit activity because of the French decision to ban its export from Syria. While conducting his business, al-Bassam tried to find a way of crossing the desert by car. The success of his venture immediately aroused the interest of Mandate officials and entrepreneurs on both sides of the desert.[30] At the same time, the French unsurprisingly took a dim view of his smuggling activities. One day in March 1923, al-Bassam and several associates were arrested and their gold shipment (about £31,000) was confiscated by the French authorities. However, the Damascus-based merchant eventually succeeded in recovering part

[27] Ulrike Freitag, Philippe Pétriat and Martin Strohmeier, 'La Première Guerre mondiale dans la péninsule Arabique… en quête de sources', *Arabian Humanities* No. 6 (2016), pp. 8–11; Philippe Pétriat, 'Caravan Trade in the Late Ottoman Empire: The ʿAqīl Network and the Institutionalization of Overland Trade', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 63:1–2 (December 2019), pp. 38–72; Philippe Pétriat, 'The Uneven Age of Speed', pp. 273–281. See also Edward A. Powell, *By Camel and Car to the Peacock Throne* (New York: Century Co, 1923), p. 63.

[28] Philippe Pétriat, 'The Uneven Age of Speed', pp. 281–282; Anthony B. Toth, 'Last Battles of the Bedouin and the Rise of Modern States in Northern Arabia: 1850-1950' in Dawn Chatty (ed.), *Nomadic Societies in the Middle East and North Africa: Entering the 21st Century* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2006), p. 65.

[29] Jane Priestland (ed.), *Records of Syria* (London: Archives Edition, 2005), Volume 2, p. 501: British Consul Palmer to Earl Curzon, Damascus, 27 April 1921.

[30] Major D. McCallum, 'The Discovery and Development of the New Land Route to the East', *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society* 12:1 (1925), p. 44; Christina Phelps Grant, *The Syrian Desert*, pp. 271–2; Philippe Pétriat, 'The Uneven Age of Speed', pp. 282–283; CADC, 48CPCOM42, 'Rapport d'ensemble sur les possibilités et l'utilité qu'il y aurait de créer un service français de transports réguliers entre Damas-Bagdad et Téhéran', prepared by the Intelligence Service, Beirut, 5 January 1924. See also Global Press Archive: 'Bayn Beirut wa Tehran', *Lisan al-Hal*, 25 June 1924, p. 1. https://gpa.eastview.com/crl/mena/ (accessed 11 May 2022).

of his shipment, thanks to the intervention of the British consul in Damascus.[31] This is because Muhammad al-Bassam's experience was recognised and valued by all of the concerned actors. His knowledge and influence among the Bedouin tribes made him the ideal person to serve as a guide during the reconnaissance expeditions organized by the first entrepreneurs interested in transdesert transport, with the help of the French and British consuls. As Robert Fletcher rightly points out, al-Bassam's critical role demonstrates that 'existing patterns of connection and exchange shaped imperial route-building' in the early twentieth century.[32] Transdesert motor routes would certainly have come into being even without Muhammad al-Bassam, but it was the experience and the knowledge of the desert acquired by this caravan merchant that made early explorations possible. Al-Bassam's motorised expeditions in the desert also confirm what historical scholarship has already shown regarding the ability of non-state actors to appropriate automotive technology.[33] As Philippe Pétriat has argued, rather than being 'passive victims of imperial and technological powers', Muhammad al-Bassam and other caravan traders were able to adapt to and take advantage of the technological and political transformations of the time.[34] Finally, while highlighting a continuity with the Ottoman period, the figure of al-Bassam suggests that the Baghdad–Damascus route was born out of smuggling.

[31] CADN, 1SL/1/V/854, Colonel Bucheton (Director, *Sûreté Générale*) to the High Commissioner for Syria, Beirut, 19 March 1923; Jane Priestland (ed.), *Records of Syria*, Volume 3: 1923–1925, pp. 154, 165: British Consul Palmer to the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Damascus, 19 March 1923 and 24 April 1923.
[32] Robert S. G. Fletcher, 'Running the Corridor: Nomadic Societies and Imperial Rule in the Inter-War Syrian Desert', *Past & Present* 220:1 (August 2013), p. 196. See also Philippe Pétriat, 'The Uneven Age of Speed', p. 275: '[Al-Bassam's] skills and knowledge were the result of his long career as an urban-based caravan trader […].'
[33] Mehdi Sakatni, 'From Camel to Truck? Automobiles and the Pastoralist Nomadism of Syrian Tribes during the French Mandate (1920–46)', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 39:1 (2019), pp. 159–169; Cyrus Schayegh, 'The Many Worlds of Abud Yasin; or, What Narcotics Trafficking in the Interwar Middle East Can Tell Us about Territorialization', *The American Historical Review* 16:2 (2011), pp. 273–306.
[34] Quote: Philippe Pétriat, 'The Uneven Age of Speed', p. 284.

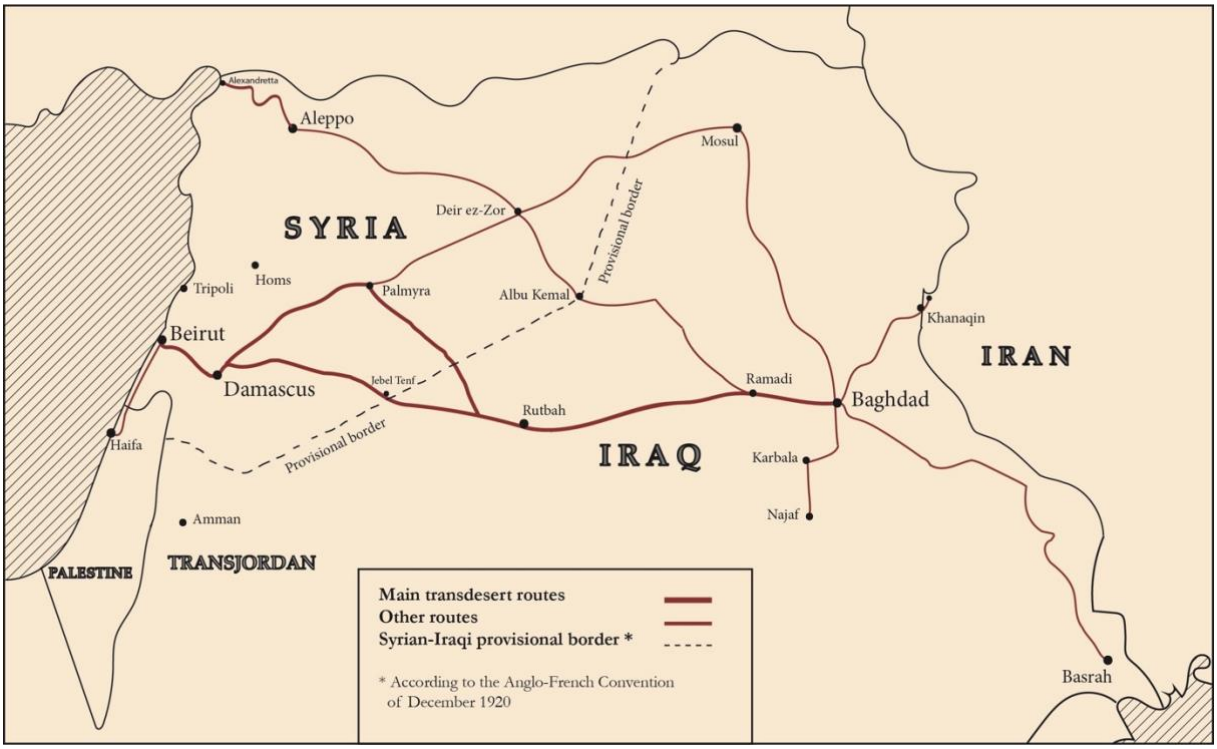

FIGURE 5: MAP OF THE TRANSDESERT ROUTES (1926)

Image credit: Redrawn by the author from: Maps of Iraq with Notes for Visitors (Baghdad: Government of Iraq, 1929).

Two companies and two routes

The reconnaissance trip made by Maigret and Drury in March 1923 showed great promise for the development of a transdesert route despite repeated breakdowns of the lorry used on the return journey, which eventually had to be towed to Baghdad.[35] This journey sparked an interest in further exploration. Therefore, the following month, a collective expedition was organised by Mr Palmer, the British consul in Damascus, Mr McCallum, the British liaison officer in Beirut, and Muhammad al-Bassam. They were joined by Norman and Jerry Nairn, two brothers from New Zealand engaged in a motorised transport business between Beirut and Haifa, who provided the cars and a mechanical engineer for this new exploratory trip. On 2 April 1923, the group left Beirut, with a few extra passengers, reaching Baghdad after a journey that took three and a half days. The success of this expedition hinged on the knowledge and equipment of the Nairn brothers, who had continued to live in the Middle East after World War I, having served in the Mechanical Transport Division of the British forces in Palestine. After the war, they decided to remain in the region and launched a transport service

[35] TNA, FO 684/1/23/1, 'Report on Journey by Motor Car over the Direct Desert Route', March 1923; TNA, FO 684/1/23/1, Drury (Public Works Department, Iraq) to British Consul Palmer, Baghdad, 30 March 1923.

between Haifa and Beirut.[36] The brothers saw the Syrian Desert as offering a great opportunity for expanding their business. Following their first expedition in April 1923, they undertook several more trips over the next few months to identify the best route linking Damascus to Baghdad, carrying a few passengers on each trip. Ultimately, they concluded that the first route they had followed on al-Bassam's advice was the best one.[37] In October 1923, the Nairns initiated a regular weekly service between Haifa, Beirut, Damascus and Baghdad.[38]

A few foreign and local travellers immediately seized the opportunity created by the new route. Muhsin Abu Tabikh, one of the Shia leaders of the Iraqi Revolution of 1920, was among the first indigenous travellers to use this route. Surprisingly, however, he used it on his return journey to Baghdad and not from Baghdad to Damascus. In June 1923, Abu Tabikh was ordered by King Faysal to leave Iraq, as he persisted in opposing the elections for the Constituent Assembly. When he left Baghdad by car on 14 June, the direct Baghdad–Damascus route was not yet open to public traffic. Therefore, he followed 'the ancient caravan route', as he wrote in his memoirs. He drove along the Euphrates via Fallujah, Ramadi, Hit and Deir ez-Zor. However, Abu Tabikh's exile did not last long. From Aleppo, he travelled to Homs, Tripoli, Beirut and Damascus before continuing on to Cairo, returning to Bilad al-Sham in September 1923. He then left Damascus on 13 October 1923, and this time, he took the direct desert route (*ṭarīq al-bādiyya*) between Damascus and Bagdad.[39] The following month, the Shah of Iran undertook an eight-day car journey from Tehran to Beirut, en route to France. He took the desert route between Bagdad and Damascus in the company of various Iranian officials and a British escort of armoured cars. The royal motorcade was given an official reception and this trip, considered as the official inauguration of the Baghdad–Damascus route, was widely publicised.[40]

The Nairn brothers were not the only entrepreneurs who benefited from this burgeoning traffic. The economic potential seemingly offered by the development of motor transportation across the desert sparked the interest of Francis and Alfred Kettaneh, two Lebanese

[36] Christina Phelps Grant, *The Syrian Desert Caravans Travel and Exploration* (London, A. & C. Black, 1937), pp. 270–272; John Munro, *The Nairn Way: Desert Bus to Baghdad* (New York: Caravan Books, 1980), pp. 27–35.
[37] Major D. McCallum, 'The Discovery and Development of the New Land Route to the East', p. 50; Christina Phelps Grant, *The Syrian Desert*, p. 272.
[38] CADC, 48CPCOM42, High Commissioner Weygand to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Beirut, January 1924.
[39] Muhsin Abu Tabikh, *Al-riḥla al-muḥsiniyya* (Beirut: Dār al-Aḍwā',1998), first edition, 1925.
[40] AUB, 'Shāh Irān fī Beirūt', *Lisan al-Hal*, 14 November 1923, p. 2; MECA, 'Haifa-Baghdad Motor Route', *The Near* East, 22 November 1923; CADC, 48CPCOM42, High Commissioner Weygand to French Foreign Ministry, Beirut, 1 December 1923; 'Notice sur une nouvelle route en Orient (de la Syrie à la Perse)', January 1924; Director of the Beirut Commercial Office to the French National Office of Foreign Trade, Beirut 3 December 1923.

entrepreneurs residing in Beirut. The two brothers were born into a family of ambitious businessmen. Their parents had moved from Jerusalem to Beirut in the late nineteenth century, where their father, Antun Kettaneh, became the manager of the newly opened local branch of Thomas Cook & Son. In Jerusalem, their brother-in-law was responsible for the Jerusalem branch.[41] In the wake of the First World War, young Francis Kettaneh, who during the war had studied to become a civil engineer at the Syrian Protestant College (renamed as the American University of Beirut [hereinafter AUB] in 1920), was recruited by the French army to take part in a wide-ranging road improvement programme. In the years that followed, the Kettaneh brothers opened a garage in Damascus, became the representatives of the Essex Company and began to import American cars into the region. Thereafter, Francis Kettaneh made a trip to the United States of America and succeeded in becoming the representative of the Dodge Brothers Company in Beirut.[42] Besides selling cars, the Kettaneh family planned to develop a transport service through the desert. In May 1923, Francis Kettaneh and his father, Antun, participated in a new reconnaissance trip organised by the Nairn brothers, together with the French Public Works Inspector and two Bedouin guides provided by Muhammad al-Bassam.[43] Antun Kettaneh described the expedition in an interview with the Beirut newspaper, *Lisan al-Hal*. He reported that the journey had taken 53 hours because of the flooding of the Euphrates and the destruction of some bridges; without these delays it would have taken only 20 hours.[44] The Kettaneh brothers undertook several explorations on their own in the months that followed, seeking another route across the desert that would pass through Palmyra and Hit, slightly north of the Nairn route. The project did not, however, proceed smoothly in the early stages. During the first few months, finding a suitable route between Palmyra and Hit, which was the most difficult and dangerous part of the journey, posed considerable difficulty. By November, the brothers had met with some success and had organised an initial convoy to inaugurate the route. However, the convoy met with an accident on the way back, as the cars—which were being driven at night—fell into a small wadi. Most of the passengers were injured, with one sustaining serious injuries, requiring transportation to the hospital in Aleppo. The accident dealt a severe

[41] Alice Boustany Djermakian, *Une saga libanaise: La famille Kettaneh* (Beirut: Edition de la Revue Phénicienne, 2016), pp. 23–28; TNA, FO 684/1/24/14, British Consul Smart to the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Beirut, 2 January 1924.

[42] Personal interview with Henri Kettaneh, son of Alfred Kettaneh, conducted at his residence in Beirut on 2 September 2019. Henri Kettaneh recounted the stories told by his father about the road construction work undertaken in Lebanon in the early twentieth century. See also Alice Boustany Djermakian, *Une saga libanaise*, pp. 29–68.

[43] CADC, 48CPCOM42, 'Rapport d'ensemble sur les possibilités et l'utilité qu'il y aurait de créer un service français de transports réguliers entre Damas-Bagdad et Téhéran', Intelligence Service, Beirut, 5 January 1924.

44 AUB, 'Min Beirūt ilā Baghdād', *Lisan al Hal*, 19 May 1923, p. 1.

blow to the reputation of the Eastern Transport Company founded by the Kettaneh brothers. British administrators did not refrain from criticising the company, attributing the accident to its practice of using local drivers.[45]

Nevertheless, the Kettaneh family managed to maintain their service during the following months and to attract increasing numbers of passengers, while gaining French backing. In January 1924, the company's convoys left Beirut every Wednesday morning and reached Palmyra for the first night halt, leaving the next morning to cross the longest stretch of desert and reach Hit, where they spent the second night. On the morning of the third day, they began the last leg of the journey, arriving in Baghdad at around 2 p.m. Return convoys left Baghdad every Wednesday.[46] In May 1924, the Kettaneh brothers extended their service to Iran, organising fortnightly convoys between Beirut and Tehran via Damascus and Baghdad.[47] A convoy of three cars left Beirut on 24 May 1924 to inaugurate the new service, transporting mail, furniture for the French Legation in Tehran and a diverse group of passengers: the French writer Jean Damase, the newly appointed French consul in Iran, an engineer of the Syrian PWD, the Duchess of Uzès and a Pathé employee.48 From this point on, two alternative routes between Baghdad and Damascus coexisted: a more direct one known as the southern route or the 'Nairn route' and a more northerly one named the 'Palmyra route' (Figure 5).

As the above discussion shows, the establishment of the transdesert transport system was contingent on a variety of human actors embedded within local, regional and transimperial networks. Various consular and technical representatives of the Mandate powers were personally involved in the promotion of motorised transport across the Syrian Desert. The Nairn brothers made their debut in the Eastern Mediterranean region as personnel within the British army before establishing a transport business across national and imperial borders. Moreover, the expertise of the local merchant, Muhammad al-Bassam, was integral for the development of the Baghdad–Damascus route. By virtue of his place of origin and residence and, above all, his commercial activities, al-Bassam was a transnational actor; a mobile subject himself and a promoter of mobility, perfectly able to adapt to and benefit from the political and territorial reconfigurations of the post-war period. Having highlighted the diversity of human actors

[45] TNA, FO 371/10092, McCallum (British liaison office) to the Air Staff in Iraq, Beirut, 29 November 1923; TNA, FO 371/10092, British Consul Smart to the Foreign Office, Beirut, 2 January 1924.
[46] TNA, FO 371/10092, Company advertisement with timetables and prices, attached to a letter from British Consul Smart to the Foreign Office, Beirut, 2 January 1924.
[47] CADC, 48CPCOM42, French Consul Maigret to the French Foreign Minister, Baghdad, 8 May 1924; TNA, FO 684/1/24/14, Hadow (British Legation in Iran) to the Foreign Office, Tehran, 9 May 1924.
[48] Jean Damase, 'Une nouvelle route vers la Perse: Beyrouth-Bagdad-Téhéran', *Revue des Deux Mondes* 28/1 (July 1925), p. 185.

involved in the development of transdesert traffic, in the next section I examine how the conditions of the desert terrain helped to shape the transdesert transport system.

The Desert as Infrastructure

From the outset of French and British colonial expansion into the Syrian Desert region, military and civilian administrators placed great importance on the collection of 'environmental intelligence' to acquire information on topography, soil types, water resources, and so forth, which was essential for mapping the territories under their control, undertaking road repairs and organising transport and communications.[49] For the same reasons, the French and British administrators who took part in the first expeditions between Baghdad and Damascus drew up reports that paid particular attention to the topographical and geographical characteristics of the Syrian Desert, highlighting, in particular, the soil conditions at different points along the route. In March 1923, a British employee of the Iraqi PWD recorded the following observation:

> The track for the greater part of the journey lies over hard sand covered with low scrub or coarse grass. There are patches of gravel with sparse shingle on top, and a long stretch in the neighbourhood of Et Tanf where there is a hard flint surface which allows the cars to travel at a high speed. A number of stony patches and dried up beds of water-courses are negotiated comfortably by experienced drivers.[50]

A month later, Major McCallum and British Consul Palmer made similar observations about the desert surface, stating that for most of the journey, the cars traversed a hard ground, sometimes encountering a few dried-up streams, which did not present great difficulties for good drivers. In their view, the desert terrain would enable drivers to drive at full speed:

> For over 70 percent of the route, the surface is such that the speed at which one can travel is only limited by the power of the engine, the necessity for the different vehicles of the convoy keeping together and the physical endurance of the drivers.[51]

The same conclusions were reached during other explorations carried out a little further north to explore the possibility of an alternative route between Damascus and Palmyra.[52] Descriptions of the desert surface abound not only in the records of the French and British Mandate

[49] Martin Thomas, *Empires of Intelligence: Security Services and Colonial Disorder after 1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), pp. 19–21, 29–31.
[50] TNA, FO 684/1/23/1, 'Report on Journey by Motor Car over the Direct Desert Route', prepared by Drury (Public Works Department, Iraq), March 1923.
[51] TNA, FO 371/9013, 'Report on Reconnaissance by Motor Car from Beyrout via Damascus to Bagdad', drawn up by Major D. McCallum (British liaison officer, Beirut), 1 May 1923.
[52] TNA, FO 684/1/23/1, McCallum to the General Headquarters of Palestine Command, Beirut, 29 March 1923.

administrations but also in the local and foreign press as well as in travelogues.[53] The French geographer, Raoul Blanchard, was particularly attentive to the desert terrain during his trip from Damascus to Baghdad:

> Le désert, en effet, se prêtait bien au passage des voitures. Son sol, grâce à l'aridité du climat, est presque toujours sec et résistant. Les accidents de terrain, sur cette grande table de calcaire, sont insignifiants : quelques collines faciles contourner, quelques lits d'oueds à franchir ; les dunes y sont très rares.[54]

As illustrated in this quote, the archival records abound with comparisons and colourful descriptions of the Syrian Desert. For example, the desert was compared to 'a billiard table'[55] or even to 'a playing field with the grass worn off it',[56] on which 'tennis courts could be laid out upon it without any previous rolling'.[57] In these circumstances, the desert environment proved to be much less of an obstacle to the development of automobile traffic than some of the mountainous regions of Syria and Iraq or sandy deserts such as the Sahara. Much to the contrary, the desert landscape between Damascus and Baghdad was a 'convenient geography' for the expansion of motor transportation, to borrow the words of John R. McNeil.[58] The knowledge that was acquired about the desert topography convinced the different actors that motorised transport would develop rapidly and easily between the Mediterranean and Mesopotamia. In particular, it bolstered the hopes of the French and British officials of developing an overland route that would facilitate Europe's access to Iran and India.

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[53] For example: AUB, 'Bayna Beirūt wa Ṭahrān', *Lisan al-Hal*, 26 June 1924, p. 1; MECA, 'London to Baghdad in Nine Days', *The Times*, 15 November 1924; Paul Gentizon, 'Lettre d'Orient: Damas-Bagdad', *Gazette de Lausanne*, 20 October 1926; Paul D. Cravath, *Letters Home from India and Irak* (New York: Cravath, 1925), p. 146; The National Library of Israel, 'Bayna al-Quds wa Baghdād: Min Dimashq ilā-l-Ruṭba', *Al-Jami'a al-Arabiyya*, 10 April 1932, p. 1. https://www.nli.org.il/en/discover/newspapers/arabic-press (accessed 12 May 2022).

[54] Raoul Blanchard, 'La route du désert de Syrie', *Annales de Géographie* 34:189 (1925), p. 235. Translation: 'The desert, indeed, was well suited to the passage of cars. Its ground, thanks to the arid climate, is almost always dry and resistant. The terrain, on this great limestone plateau, is insignificant: a few hills that can be easily circumvented, a few wadi beds to be crossed; dunes are very rare.'

[55] MECA, Nairn Transport Company Collection, 'Across the Syrian Desert by Car: A Passenger and Mail Service between Beyrouth and Bagdad', *The Motor*, 14 October 1924, p. 519.

[56] TNA, FO 371/10093, 'Report on the Beirut-Tehran Motor Route', drawn up by Norman Mayers (British acting vice-consul, Tehran), attached to a letter from British Consul Satow, Beirut, 26 October 1924.

[57] TNA, FO 371/9013, 'New Trans-Desert Postal Service', British Consul Palmer to the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Damascus, 16 April 1923.

[58] John R. McNeill, 'The Eccentricity of the Middle East and North Africa's Environmental History', in Alan Mikhail (ed.), *Water on Sand: Environmental Histories of the Middle East and North Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 45.

The most basic infrastructure prevailed

The convenient terrain not only influenced perceptions but it also led to a particular mode of development of the Baghdad–Damascus route. Here, other historical circumstances came into play. In the immediate post-war period, the gloomy economic climate prompted the French and British governments to call for savings from their overseas administrations in their colonies and in mandated territories. As a result, the French and British Mandate states were required to become self-financing. This injunction compelled the Mandate authorities to refrain from investing in major infrastructure development, pushing them to rely on private actors instead. This situation lasted throughout the 1920s; subsequently, numerous infrastructure development projects were implemented from the first half of the 1930s.[59]

The introduction of budgetary restrictions and the viability of car traffic in the Syrian Desert combined to deal a severe blow to transdesert railway projects. In the aftermath of the First World War, several projects to build a railway through the Syrian Desert emerged, leading to the revival of other plans formulated around the middle of the previous century, such as the Euphrates Valley Railway project.[60] On the eve of the First World War, and later after taking up positions in the Eastern Mediterranean and in Mesopotamia, the British considered building a railway line between Baghdad and the Mediterranean. At the time, they were considering an overland desert route for a railway line rather than a road for cars and trucks.[61] As early as 1920, British administrators made several reconnaissance trips into the desert between Haifa and Baghdad to explore the possibility of building a railway. According to Major Holt, who was in charge of the expeditions, the railway project was the best scheme for increasing trade between the Mediterranean, Iraq and Iran.[62] Nevertheless, given that the construction of a railway was

[59] On the self-financing imperative of the Mandate states, see Kais Firro, *Inventing Lebanon: Nationalism and State under the Mandate* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002), pp. 79–80; Liat Kozma, *Global Women, Colonial Ports: Prostitution in the Interwar Middle East* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017), p. 61; Jacob Norris, *Land of Progress: Palestine in the Age of Colonial Development, 1905-1948* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 111–112; Cyrus Schayegh and Andrew Arsan, *The Routledge Handbook of the History of the Middle East Mandates* (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 4. More generally, on calls for savings in the British Empire and the Mandate in Iraq, see Toby Dodge, 'International Obligation, Domestic Pressure and Colonial Nationalism: The Birth of the Iraqi State under the Mandate System', in Nadine Méouchy and Peter Sluglett (eds.), *The British and French Mandates in Comparative Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 2014) pp. 143–164; Nadine Picaudou, *La décennie qui ébranla le Moyen-Orient* (Paris: Flammarion, 2017), p. 152. Some government officials in France and Britain also opposed colonial expansion in the Middle East on financial grounds; see Simon Jackson, '"What is Syria Worth?" The Huvelin Mission, Economic Expertise and the French Project in the Eastern Mediterranean, 1918-1922', *Monde(s)* 2:4 (2013), p. 87.

[60] Harold Lancaster Hoskins, *British Routes to India* (Philadelphia: Longmans Green, 1928), pp. 321–342; Edward H. Keeling, 'The Proposed Haifa–Baghdad Railway', *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society* 21:3 (1934), pp. 373-393; AUB, 'Proposed Haifa–Baghdad Railway', *The Palestine Post*, 27 July 1934.

[61] See, for instance, William Willcocks, 'Mesopotamia: Past, Present, and Future', *The Geographical Journal* 35:1 (1910), p. 13.

[62] A. L. Holt, 'The Future of the North Arabian Desert, *The Geographical Journal* 62:4 (1923), p. 266.

costly and time-consuming, the Haifa–Baghdad railway project did not gain the support of the British government at a time of economic frugality. Moreover, the construction of railway infrastructure could not compete with the car transport service, which was developing rapidly across the desert thanks, almost exclusively, to private initiatives.[63] The same conclusions were drawn by the French, who also studied the possibility of a transdesert railway. As noted in a report on Syria and Lebanon submitted to the League of Nations, the transdesert routes lent themselves to year-round automobile traffic with virtually no maintenance work required, thus making any transdesert railway project uncompetitive given the amount of capital required for its construction.[64] As Paul Gentizon, a Swiss journalist, noted in an article published in *La Gazette de Lausanne* in October 1926, in the Syrian Desert, the car made 'the road and the railway unnecessary'.[65] In short, the desert terrain made the car more competitive than the train. This observation sheds new light on the lack of fruition of the Haifa–Baghdad railway in the 1920s and invites us to refrain from a view that imperial strategies alone account for the (non-)development of transport infrastructure in the region.[66]

Furthermore, the practicability of the terrain in the Syrian Desert, combined with the economic imperative of the Mandate powers, meant that a very basic material structure was required for the transport system. At the beginning of the 1920s, the French administrations in Lebanon and Syria and the British administration in Iraq undertook to improve their road networks at great expense and with considerable difficulty. The French, for instance, worked to improve the road network of Bilad al-Sham in the aftermath of the war by transforming earth roads into paved roads. Labour was recruited from the villages to crush stones found in the vicinity and cover the roads. These efforts, however, were hampered by the lack of equipment and construction materials in many areas and the rapid wear and tear of certain poorly constructed roads, especially in areas where contractors did not have the necessary equipment,

[63] Morton B. Stratton, 'British Railways and Motor Roads in the Middle East, 1918–1930', p. 123; British Library (via Qatar Digital Library), Coll 17/7(1): 'Iraq and Palestine: Agreement for Transit through Palestine of Goods to and from Iraq; Baghdad-Haifa Railway': Robert Waley Cohen (chairman, Palestine Corporation Limited) to the Colonial Office, London, 14 October 1934. https://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc_100076591287.0x000027 (accessed 12 May 2022). On the lower costs of developing road transport compared to rail transport, see also Shereen Khairallah, 'Railway Networks of the Middle East to 1948' in Thomas Philipp and Birgit Schäbler (eds.), *The Syrian Land: Processes of Integration and Fragmentation: Bilād Al-Shām from the 18th to the 20th Century* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1998), p. 93.

[64] LON, R4096/6A/3830/1469, 'The French Mandate on Syria and Lebanon - Report for 1932'.

[65] Paul Gentizon, 'Lettres d'Orient: Damas–Bagdad', *La Gazette de Lausanne*, 10 October 1928, p. 1.

[66] Keith Neilson, for example, has analysed the Haifa–Bagdad railway project within the broader framework of British imperial defence, entailing a constant preoccupation with preventing Russian expansion and controlling access to India through railway construction. See Keith Neilson, 'The Bagdad to Haifa Railway. The Culmination of Railway Planning for Imperial Defence East of Suez' in T.G. Otte and Keith Neilson (eds.), *Railways and International Politics: Paths of Empire, 1848-1945* (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 156–172.

such as road rollers.[67] To reduce costs, the French often chose to build temporary tracks deemed sufficient to allow the passage of light vehicles during the dry months, particularly in less frequented areas and near the desert. These tracks were gradually transformed into proper roads as traffic increased and where budgets allowed.[68] In Iraq, the PWD established by the British administration was responsible for developing the road network and connecting the different parts of the country. However, in almost all areas, the PWD faced severe shortages of road building materials, especially stones. The alluvial plain around Fallujah was one of the least suitable terrain for road construction, not only because of the lack of building materials but also because of the existence of numerous canals and dykes and the regular flooding of the Euphrates.[69] In 1927, Iraqi Prime Minister Jaafar Al-Askari described the work of road building in Iraq as follows: 'With us, indeed, the making of roads is chiefly a matter of building bridges, as almost any part of the plain can be crossed if canals, etc., are bridged.'[70]

Against this backdrop, the suitability of the desert for vehicular traffic was a boon for the French and British authorities who sought to keep their expenses to a minimum. They were convinced that the development of the Baghdad–Damascus route would not require much investment, as cars could drive on it without having to level the ground with graders, pave it and build bridges.[71] In late 1923, the French High Commissioner was pleased to announce the success of the Nairn Transport Company, noting that the desert terrain enabled cars to make the crossing at an average speed of 55 km/h 'without the need to specially equip the cars for this route which, moreover, remain[ed] practicable ten months a year'.[72] Under these conditions, improvements to the desert tracks were kept to a minimum. Muhammad al-Bassam was given the task of upgrading some stretches, as the British consul in Damascus explained: 'Bassam, who alone could do it—with Bedouin labour—will have the few bad patches of track repaired,

[67] CADC, 50CPCOM83, 'Note sur les travaux publics', prepared by the Association Française de Cautionnement Mutuel, December 1919; NARA, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Asia, 1910–1929, microfilm roll 14, File 890d.154: U.S. Consul Buhram to the Department of State, Aleppo, 15 October 1924; TNA, FO 424/632, British Consul Satow to Chamberlain (Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs), Beirut, 9 January 1925; SHD/GR 4 H 71/3, French delegation in Damascus, *Contrôle Bédouin*, 2nd Quarterly Report, Damascus, 28 July 1924.

[68] CADC, 50CPCOM83, 'Note sur les travaux publics', prepared by Association Française de Cautionnement Mutuel, December 1919; CADC, 50CPCOM358, 'Note sur l'automobilisme en Syrie et au Liban', attached to a letter from High Commissioner Sarrail, Beirut, 21 May 1925.

[69] BL, IOR/L/MIL/17/15/47, 'Military Report on Iraq - Volume II (Routes)', p. 6.

[70] Jaafar al-Askari, 'Five Years' Progress in Iraq', *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society* 14:1 (1927), p. 63. The High Commissioner for Iraq, Henry Dobbs, also shared this view, as discussed in Iain Jackson, 'The Architecture of the British Mandate in Iraq: Nation-Building and State Creation', *The Journal of* Architecture 21:3 (2016), p. 387.

[71] Morton B. Stratton, 'British Railways and Motor Roads in the Middle East, 1918–1930', *Economic Geography*, 20:2 (1944), p. 124.

[72] CADC, 48CPCOM42, High Commissioner Weygand to the French Foreign Minister, Beirut, 1 December 1923. Translation is mine.

stones removed from the dry rocky Wadis on the route etc.'[73] The French improved a marshy area near Palmyra and some stretches between Damascus and Palmyra. Elsewhere, drivers did not need help negotiating this terrain; they simply followed the tracks of cars ahead of them. As the U.S. consul in Tehran put it, 'when one track gets bad there is an endless choice of ground on either side for a new track.'[74] In November 1924, Major McCallum pointed out that the 'track [has] now been covered so many times that all obstacles in the way of stones, holes, etc., [have] been eliminated.'[75] (Figure 6) Some companies confirmed that macadamised roads could be dispensed with. In June 1926, the Lebanese company, Kawatly Tawil, reported to the High Commissioner that the roads leading to the desert were often in poor condition but that the desert stretches between Palmyra and Baghdad were passable, if not fairly good.[76] It was not until the mid-1930s that the administrations began paving and surfacing the desert tracks.

FIGURE 6: AROUND PALMYRA

Image credit: Swiss National Library, SLA-Schwarzenbach-A-5-05-043. Creator: Annemarie Schwarzenbach (Wikimedia Commons).

[73] TNA, FO 371/9013, British Consul Palmer to the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Damascus, 16 April 1923.
[74] NARA, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Persia, 1910–1929, microfilm roll 32, File 891.797, George Gregg Fuller (American vice consul) to the Department of State, Tehran, 25 January 1925.
[75] Major McCallum, 'The Discovery and Development of the New Land Route to the East', p. 55.
[76] CADC, 50CPCOM43, Kawatly, Tawil & Co. to the French High Commissioner, Beirut, 17 June 1926.

In this context, encouraging private enterprise was seen as the best way of promoting desert travel at the lowest cost. Much more than engineers and bureaucrats, it was transport entrepreneurs and users who built the roads. The Nairn Transport Company and the Eastern Transport Company—as well as smaller, less well known but equally important companies, to which I will return in Chapter 3—established a route that gradually became known and visible to drivers. Thus, the transport system of the Baghdad–Damascus route took shape 'under the wheels' of cars rather than as a result of an engineering programme developed by the Mandate states.[77] The French and British counted on the transport companies to generate a stream of traffic ('*un courant*' in French writings) across the desert. In their view, an increasing number of cars crossing the desert meant the increasing popularity of the Baghdad–Damascus route, which would eventually supplant other routes on a transregional scale, such as the Suez Canal route and the Caucasus route.[78] Reliance on private actors did not, however, apply solely to transdesert traffic in the 1920s; rather, it was a strategy adopted by both French and British Mandate administrations in the Middle East. Entrusting the construction and management of large-scale infrastructure to non-state actors, whether legal entities or private individuals, was a common practice in response to the imperative of restraint imposed by Paris and London.[79]

In sum, the nature of the desert terrain was a major factor influencing the formation of the transdesert transport system and the rapid development of motorised transport between Syria and Iraq, while reducing the appeal of the railway option. However, ground conditions were not the same throughout the Syrian Desert. The southern parts of the desert terrain stretching between Mafraq in Transjordan and Rutbah in Iraq presented very different conditions, which were far less suitable for motorised traffic. These variations in terrain influenced the way in which transdesert traffic developed in the 1920s and played into Franco–British rivalry. In the following section, I examine failed attempts at developing motorised transport across the southern parts of the Syrian Desert.

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[77] This expression is taken from *The Making of the African Road*, which draws attention to informal and popular forms of road building in the African context, emphasising local rather that state initiatives. See Kurt Beck, Gabriel Klaeger and Michael Stasik, *The Making of the African Road* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), p. 14.

[78] CADC, 48CPCOM42, French Consul Maigret to the French Foreign Minister, Baghdad, 18 April 1923; Director of the Beirut Commercial Office to the (French) National Office of Foreign Trade, Beirut, 5 December 1923; CADN, 1SL/1/V/702, Note on the Beirut-Baghdad-Tehran route drawn up by Bériel (economic and agricultural affairs advisor to the High Commission), Beirut, 4 May 1925.

[79] Simon Jackson, 'Mandatory Development: The Political Economy of the French Mandate in Syria and Lebanon, 1915–1939' (PhD thesis, New York University, 2009); Cyrus Schayegh and Andrew Arsan, *The Routledge Handbook of the History of the Middle East Mandates*, p. 4.

The impracticality of the Haifa–Baghdad route

The development of transdesert routes was a breeding ground for Franco–British rivalry in the Middle East. Before the Baghdad–Damascus route became established as the main transdesert route linking the Mediterranean with Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf, the British had considered a more southerly route. During the First World War, British forces captured Haifa and endeavoured to develop it into an important commercial and strategic centre in the Eastern Mediterranean region. To this end, they undertook numerous infrastructure development projects in the city, built a railway linking Haifa with Cairo and planned the construction of a modern port. Haifa's importance to the British was also measured by its connections to the east. The city was to become the main outlet for goods transported to and from Iraq and Iran, as well as for oil extracted in these two countries. In the same vein, the British were keen to retain control of a strip of land stretching between the territories that they controlled in Palestine and Mesopotamia during the post-war settlement negotiations. Ultimately, they succeeded in acquiring what was to become Transjordan, thereby clearing the way for a desert corridor linking the British territories on either side of the Syrian Desert.[80]

British plans to develop an 'all-red route' from Cairo to Baghdad via Haifa inevitably rekindled Franco–British rivalry in the region. Yet such a route remained to be established. In 1921, the British considered establishing a regular air service between Cairo and Baghdad and once again commissioned Major Holt to survey the Syrian Desert between Haifa and Baghdad to identify a route for aircraft to follow. Major Holt thus undertook further expeditions after having explored the desert a year earlier to investigate the possibilities of a transdesert railway. As a result of these new expeditions, a furrow in the desert was ploughed with tractors to guide the Royal Air Force aircraft, which remained visible for many years and was known as the 'air furrow'.[81] These exploratory trips also enabled Major Holt to experiment with driving in the southern part of the Syrian Desert known as the Harrat (*ḥarra*), covering parts of Palestine, Transjordan and Iraq. He described this region in two articles published in 1923 in *The Geographical Journal* and *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society*. As he observed, while most of the Syrian Desert was flat and made up of a layer of dust and gravel covering a limestone ground, the Harrat was a volcanic area 'almost entirely overlain with lava and great

[80] Jacob Norris, *Land of Progress*, pp. 10–11, 99–138. See also Robert S. G. Fletcher, 'Running the Corridor', pp. 185–215; Aaron S. Klieman, 'Britain's War Aims in the Middle East in 1915', *Journal of Contemporary History* 3:3 (1968), pp. 237–251; Tariq M. Tell, *The Social and Economic Origins of Monarchy in Jordan* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 57.
[81] Christina Phelps Grant, *The Syrian Desert*, pp. 289–290.

basalt blocks'.[82] (Figure 7) Consequently, the Ford cars, which he used during the explorations, were unable to cross this area, and, unlike camels, were obliged to circumvent it.[83]

FIGURE 7: THE VOLCANIC REGION OF THE SYRIAN DESERT

Image credit: Keystone-Mast Collection, UCR/California Museum of Photography, University of California, Riverside. Photograph by Meiss-Teuffen No. 40 [Date not indicated] (public domain).

The nature of the terrain in the southern part of the Syrian Desert prevented the British from opening a route for cars connecting Haifa, Amman and Baghdad, as this endeavour would have required far too much work. As Major McCallum explained to an audience at the headquarters of the Royal Central Asian Society in November 1924, Major Holt's explorations proved that the Baghdad–Haifa route was 'not a commercial proposition' compared with the Baghdad–Damascus route, as cars took between eight and twelve days to complete the journey because of the difficult terrain. He added that in addition to these environmental factors, the Baghdad–Damascus route had benefited from a good macadamised road constructed in the

[82] A. L. Holt, 'The Future of the North Arabian Desert', p. 262.
[83] A. L. Holt, 'Some Journeys in the Syrian Desert', *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society* 10:3 (1923), pp. 176–177.

1860s between Damascus and Beirut, whereas the road constructed between Amman and Haifa was of very poor quality.[84] In other words, the transport infrastructure inherited from the Ottoman period also contributed to giving the Baghdad–Damascus–Beirut route an advantage over other potential transdesert routes.

The British did not, however, completely abandon the idea of establishing a transdesert route through British territory only. This looming threat prompted the French to be proactive. After negotiations conducted with Norman Nairn, the French High Commissioner decided to allow the Nairn Transport Company to pass through Syrian–Lebanese territory on condition that its cars stopped in Beirut. This arrangement was intended to prevent the establishment of direct connections between Palestine and Iraq and to attract traffic to the port of Beirut rather than that of Haifa.[85] The threat became more tangible in the autumn of 1925. As I show in more detail in Chapter 2, transdesert traffic was severely disrupted during the Syrian Revolt of 1925–1926. With the spread of the uprising throughout Syria, entailing frequent attacks on transdesert convoys, the Nairn Transport Company was forced to divert its cars to the Amman–Baghdad route for some months. Although this temporary diversion rekindled the hopes of British officials, the Nairn brothers were forced to abandon that route after a while, as the roughness of the terrain damaged the cars to such an extent that they were rapidly put out of service.[86] In October 1925, Norman Nairn told the British consul in Damascus that maintaining traffic on the southern route would cause the 'financial ruin' of the company, as the nature of the track placed 'a severe strain on cars, chauffeurs and passengers'.[87] The experience of the Nairn Transport Company, which only lasted from the beginning of September 1925 up to April 1926, when they reoriented their service to the Palmyra route,[88] buried the Haifa–Amman–Baghdad route project, at least for a few years.

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[84] Major McCallum, 'The Discovery and Development of the New Land Route to the East', pp. 51–52.

[85] CADC, 48CPCOM42, High Commissioner Weygand to the French Foreign Minister, Beirut, 5 November 1923 and January 1924; High Commissioner Sarrail to the French Foreign Minister, Beirut, 18 April 1925; CADC, 50CPCOM162, Sarrail to the French Foreign Minister, Beirut, 29 January 1925.

[86] TNA, FO 371/10831, Norman Nairn to Albert Stern (Stern Brothers, London), Beirut, 26 November 1925: 'The revolution has been most unfortunate as this would undoubtedly have proved to be our best season, although it has taught us by our experience of the last two months, that the Amman route will never compete with the Damascus route' (original emphasis). See also CADC, 48CPCOM43, Acting French High Commissioner to the French Foreign Minister, Beirut, 14 May 1927; TNA, FO 424/632, British Consul Satow to Sir Austen Chamberlain, Beirut, 16 April 1929.

[87] TNA, FO 371/10831, British Consul Smart to the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Damascus, 1 October 1925. It was also reported that while the Nairn Transport Company made a profit of £4,000 in the first half of 1925, it made no profit during the time when the Amman route was plied, and even lost money because of a heavy 'tyre bill': TNA, FO 371/11466, General Mance (Nairn Eastern Transport Company) to Albert Stern, Beirut, 28 December 1925.

[88] TNA, FO 371/10831, High Commissioner Dobbs to the Colonial Office, Baghdad, 10 September 1925; John Munro, *The Nairn Way*, pp. 72–73.

The varying characteristics of the Syrian Desert terrain had lasting implications for the development of the Baghdad–Damascus route and its transport system. Because of the impracticality of the Baghdad–Haifa route for motorised transport, the main transdesert route in the 1920s straddled two Mandate spaces or, put another way, two empires. As Major McCallum told his audience at the Royal Central Asian Society, the 'new land route to the East' lay half in French territory and half in British territory.[89] This aspect of transdesert connections may go unnoticed if the focus is only on a single empire or on the territories of a single League of Nations mandate. For example, Robert Fletcher's book on the interplay between nomadism and British imperialism suffers from an exclusive focus on the British Empire, leading the author to approach communication routes across the Syrian Desert primarily as part of a 'corridor of the British Empire', which stretched from Egypt to Iraq via Palestine and Transjordan. His book thus maintains a 'national-imperial' analytical framework that echoes the perceptions and hopes of British actors at the time.[90] Even though he noted incidentally that the main transdesert route passed through French territory because of the difficult terrain in Transjordan,[91] he treated it purely as a British imperial route in his analysis, completely setting aside both Bilad al-Sham and the French, Lebanese and Syrian actors.

However, as the various chapters of this dissertation will show, this environmental peculiarity was not just a detail in the history of transdesert connectivity. On the contrary, because the Baghdad–Damascus route was a transimperial route—before it also became a cross-border one—the development of motorised transport across the Syrian Desert was marked by negotiations, competition and cooperation between the French and British authorities. Furthermore, users and operators of the transport service sought to exploit the inter-imperial relations that played out around the organisation of transdesert traffic. In short, the terrain of the Syrian Desert shaped the new overland route as 'a place of Anglo-French imperial entanglement'.[92]

[89] Major McCallum, 'The Discovery and Development of the New Land Route to the East', pp. 51–52.
[90] Daniel Hedinger and Nadin Heé have pointed out that 'whereas national history has been transnationalized in recent decades, the history of empires has, by and large, remained nationalized'. See Daniel Hedinger and Nadin Heé, 'Transimperial History - Connectivity, Cooperation and Competition', *Journal of Modern European History* 16:4 (2018), p. 429.
[91] Robert S. G. Fletcher, *British Imperialism and 'The Tribal Question*', p. 75.
[92] As was the Suez Canal; see James R. Fichter, 'Britain and France, Connected Empires' in James R. Fichter (ed.), *British and French Colonialism in Africa, Asia and the Middle East: Connected Empires across the Eighteenth to the Twentieth Centuries* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), p. 7.

Rutbah: the water point-turned-fort and hotel

The existence of water points and the lengths of the sections of the route that passed through uninhabited areas were important considerations for the Nairn and Kettaneh brothers when they were attempting to establish their own routes through the desert. The stretch of desert along the direct 'Nairn route' extended for about 600 kilometres between Ramadi on the banks of the Euphrates and Dumeir, a Syrian village near Damascus located on the fringe of the desert. The desert section of the Palmyra route was shorter. Thanks to the relay offered by this town, the distance between Kubeisa and Palmyra that cars of the Eastern Transport Company had to cover across the desert was about 100 km shorter.[93] In addition, the direct route only passed through a few watering places located at Rutbah Wells, in the midst of the desert, and did not cross any inhabited areas, except for some Bedouin settlements. Whereas Rutbah was frequently visited by nomads and their herds for its waterholes, it was not a permanent settlement.[94] At first, the scarcity of water raised some doubts about the practicability of this route. In April 1923, McCallum stated that the lack of water between Ramadi and Dumair was 'the great drawback' of the direct route.[95] Under these circumstances, the Nairn Transport Company decided that each of its convoys would take a week's supply of water. More generally, the company relied on its capacity to provide passengers with all necessary services independently.[96]

Francis and Alfred Kettaneh therefore hoped that their northern route would become travellers' preferred route, as they passed through Palmyra, where they could find shelter as well as more watering places. As a French report pointed out in 1924, the Kettaneh route was longer but 'more civilised' because travellers could sleep in Palmyra and Hit.[97] To provide their passengers with better accommodation, the Kettaneh brothers planned to develop a comfortable hotel in Palmyra. On 20 September 1924, the French Mandate authorities authorised the Eastern Transport Company to lease a 6,500 square metre plot of land in Palmyra to build a hotel in return for a symbolic annual rent of one Syrian lira, so as to 'facilitate travel and trade between Syria and Iraq'.[98] The work was undertaken quickly, thanks in part to a grant received from the

[93] CADC 48CPCOM42, 'Notice sur une nouvelle route en Orient (de la Syrie à la Perse)', January 1924.
[94] TNA, FO 684/1/23/1, Annex D on 'Natural Features' attached to a letter from British Consul Palmer to the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Damascus, 24 April 1925.
[95] TNA, FO 371/9013, 'Report on Reconnaissance by Motor Car from Beyrout via Damascus to Bagdad', drawn up by Major D. McCallum (British liaison officer), Beirut, 1 May 1923.
[96] TCA, Cook's Traveller's Handbook Palestine and Syria, 1924 (code: TCG/PB/02.02/0153), pp, 418–419.
[97] CADC, 48CPCOM42, Extract from a letter written by Verchère de Reffye (Acting High Commissioner), Beirut, probably dated January 1924.
[98] TNA, FO 371/10093, Decree No. 230, 20 September 1924, signed by Nassouhi (the governor of the state of Damascus) and Schoeffler (the High Commission's delegation in Damascus).

tourism commission, and by December 1924, the hotel was almost complete.[99] Later, the company built a small hotel in Kubeisa, near Hit, on the edge of the desert to shorten the section of the journey across the desert section even more. By early 1926, a Syrian manager was running the Kubeisa Hotel, which provided travellers with nine rooms, each with two or three beds, but the hotel was somewhat damaged by heavy rains. In Palmyra, the hotel comprised eleven rooms and there were already plans to build twelve more.[100] Some travellers supported the argument in favour of the Palmyra route. Returning from India overland to Palestine in March 1925, American lawyer Paul Cravath unhesitatingly chose the longer but less deserted Palmyra route: 'We chose the latter route as we could not imagine ourselves happy traveling in motor cars over rough desert roads for almost thirty hours without a stop.'[101]

The apparent advantage of the northern route would eventually lose out to the crucial importance of Rutbah Wells on the southern route. Rutbah was situated in one of the largest depressions of the desert, which drained rainwater to this spot. Built before the twentieth century, the wells of Rutbah were well known to the Bedouin pastoral tribes, who migrated seasonally across the desert. Rutbah Wells was therefore a place ripe for an outpost because of the presence of year-round water and its location, which was equidistant from major Syrian and Iraqi cities: '271 miles from Baghdad, 261 from Damascus, 180 from Palmyra, and 341 from Amman', as noted in the *Baghdad Times*.[102] The Iraqi government considered building a fortified post at Rutbah in order to police the desert borderlands and better monitor transdesert mobility, as will be discussed more fully in Chapter 2, but also to make transdesert traffic easier and safer. From the beginning, the Nairn Transport Company was involved in the work. The construction of the fort required a sizeable workforce and a large quantity of construction materials, which were scarce in the surroundings of Rutbah and had to be brought in over several hundred kilometres. Between October and November 1925, the Nairn's Leland trucks transported steel, stone and other materials as well as workers to Rutbah Wells. In bitterly cold weather, dozens of workers began the construction of the post, the foundations of which were completed by the end of 1925.[103] In the interim, the Nairn Transport Company applied to the Iraqi government and the British authorities to receive exclusive authorisation to build a hotel

[99] FO 684/1/24/14, Acting British Consul Vaughan-Russel to the Department of Overseas Trade, Damascus, 15 December 1924; LON, R22/1/47053/4284, The French Mandate on Syria – Report on the Situation of Syria and Lebanon 1924, p. 67.
[100] CADC, 48CPCOM43, 'Rapport sur la question des transports vers l'Irak et la Perse par la route transcontinentale', 4 February 1926.
[101] Paul D. Cravath, *Letters Home from India and Irak* (New York: Cravath, 1925), p. 145.
[102] CADC, 48CPCOM43, 'The Rutbah Post', *Bagdad Times*, 5 February 1926.
[103] TNA, AIR 23/293, Special Service Office (SSO) Ramadi, Report for the fortnight ending 8 October 1925; TNA, FO 371/10831, Norman Nairn to Albert Stern, Beirut, 26 November 1925.

in Rutbah. They argued that because of the large investment required for this work, they should have a monopoly on accommodation in Rutbah.[104]

The Iraqi government did not give in to Norman Nairn's demands and decided to build the hotel itself. The Rutbah post was completed in mid-1926 and the rest house in 1927. On 2 April 1928, the Iraqi government concluded an agreement with the Nairn Transport Company, whereby the latter leased a portion of the building for a period of three years to provide lodging for travellers crossing the desert. The company appointed a certain Bill Fraser as manager of the new hotel, which comprised sixteen rooms at the time. The Iraqi government insisted that accommodation was to be offered to all travellers, whether or not they were travelling with the Nairn Transport Company.[105] The Rutbah Post was a large square building with an expansive inner courtyard that could accommodate cars; the different wings of the building around the courtyard were occupied by the rooms, the restaurant, the warehouses, as well as the customs and police posts. The fort was also equipped with a wireless radio. Next to it was a triangular courtyard for camel-mounted police.[106] Cars could enter the courtyard through a gate, manned by guards, who kept it closed at night against possible attacks. One of the wells of Rutbah was in the main courtyard, surrounded by walls that made it inaccessible to the nomadic groups. The well was also dug deeper in order to access better quality water.[107]

One of the functions of Rutbah was to serve as a stopover between Damascus and Baghdad, where travellers and drivers could be safe, find food and water and rest. Rutbah enabled travellers to shelter from sandstorms, and halt for a few hours when the weather was bad. In the words of the American consul in Baghdad, John Randolph, Rutbah was 'a safety zone halfway across the desert'.[108] The Rutbah Fort was also equipped with a sort of pole which illuminated its surroundings at night like a lighthouse, indicating the way to drivers.[109] Many travellers only stopped in Rutbah for a few hours, eating a snack and walking in the courtyard and the surrounding area before hitting the road again. After an often-gruelling journey on

[104] TNA, FO 371/10831, 'Facilities Desired by the Nairn Transport Company', attached to a letter from Nairn Transport Company to the High Commissioner for Iraq, Beirut, 28 October 1925.
[105] TNA, CO 732/39/11, Copy of Agreement made on 2 April 1928 between Abd al-Muhsin al-Shalash (Minister of Communications and Works, Government of Iraq) and the Nairn Transport Company.
[106] See the plan of the Rutbah Post reproduced in Iain Jackson, 'The Architecture of the British Mandate in Iraq', p. 395.
[107] John Munro, *The Nairn Way*, pp. 89–90.
[108] John Randolph, 'Desert Routes between Baghdad and the Mediterranean', *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* No. 31 (1928), p. 20.
[109] Maurice Honoré, *Vers Bagdad* (Paris: Roger, 1929), pp. 167–168.

desert tracks, surrounded by a halo of dust and sand, the stop in Rutbah offered a respite.[110] Others rented a room in the hotel and set off again the following morning.[111]

Rutbah thus became a central node on the transdesert routes due to a combination of human and environmental factors. The first was its location within a large depression known as Wadi Hauran, which drained rainwater from the surrounding areas. The presence of wells built before the advent of motorised transport, serves as a reminder that Rutbah was already a 'hybrid landscape' in which environmental and technological elements were combined before the twentieth century.[112] The second was the self-interested actions of the Nairn Transport Company, which transported the materials necessary for the construction of the building in order to be granted the management of the future hotel. Ultimately, the fort and hotel at Rutbah provided the Nairn Transport Company with the desert harbour it lacked in the early years of its desert service. It also gave the direct route a definitive advantage over the Palmyra route by dividing the desert stage of the journey into two sections, each of which was now shorter than the desert leg of the northern route. As time went by, the Palmyra route was abandoned in favour of the direct route, which provided travellers with greater security and comfort.[113] The Rutbah Post became a central component of the infrastructural system that facilitated the movement of cars, passengers and goods across the desert in ever increasing numbers. The transport system of the Baghdad–Damascus route formed a 'corridor' through the Syrian–Iraqi borderlands. Rutbah was the gateway that ensured 'the continuity of circulation' through this corridor.[114]

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[110] 'Ali Saydu al-Gurani, *Min 'Ammān ilā al-'Imādiyya, aw, Jawla fī Kurdistān al-janūbiyya* (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Sa'āda bi-jiwār muḥāfaẓat Miṣr,1939), p. 1; Clärenore Stinnes, *Im Auto durch zwei Welten: Die erste Autofahrt einer Frau um die Welt* (Wien: Promedia, 1996), p. 58; Henry Vallotton-Warnery, *Sur une six-roues : de Paris au Caire par Constantinople et Bagdad* (Lausanne: Ed. Spes, 1927), p. 143.

[111] Yusuf Ghanima, *Riḥla ilā Urubbā 1929: mukhtārāt min yawmiyyāt wa rasā'il*, (Baghdad: Maṭbaʿat al-Sa'dūn, 1986), p. 15.

[112] Richard White, 'From Wilderness to Hybrid Landscapes: The Cultural Turn in Environmental History', *The Historian* 66:3 (2004), pp. 557–564. The archaeological research conducted by the French Jesuit, Antoine Poidebard, in the Syrian Desert during and after the First World War provided evidence of how the desert environment had been transformed by humans in Roman times. See Lévon Nordiguian and Marc-Antoine Kaeser, *De l'Asie mineure au ciel du Levant: Antoine Poidebard, explorateur et pionnier de l'archéologie aérienne* (Hauterive: Laténium, 2016).

[113] TNA, FO 424/632, British Consul Satow to Sir Austen Chamberlain, Beirut, 11 January 1928. See also *Maps of Iraq with Notes for Visitors* (Baghdad: Government of Iraq, 1929), p. 11.

[114] Randy William Widdis, 'Looking through the Mirror: A Historical Geographical View of the Canadian–American Borderlands', *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 30:2 (2015), p. 181.

FIGURE 8: RUTBAH FROM THE AIR, CA. 1932

Image credit: Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington D.C., 20540 USA. Matson (G. Eric and Edith) Photograph Collection. Creator: American Colony (Jerusalem), unknown photograph. Title: 'Air route to Baghdad via Amman and the desert. Rutba wells from lower altitude, showing desert track to Baghdad'. LC-M33- 4505. (No known restrictions).[115]

Cars and Tyres under Strain

Although the desert terrain between Damascus and Ramadi was sufficiently convenient for motorised transport to enable entrepreneurs to be the primary force behind the transport system, it nevertheless imposed constraints on the vehicles and equipment used for transdesert traffic. Unlike transport services in cities where the use of old vehicles was deemed appropriate,[116] transport contractors preferred to use new vehicles, as they were less likely to break down over long-distance journeys, especially across the desert. But choosing the right

[115] The Library of Congress notes 'no known restrictions on publication' and states that the rights related to the G. Eric and Edith Matson Photograph Collection were transferred to the 'American public' in 2003: 'The Kensington Episcopal Home conveyed the collection to the Library in 1978. In 2003, the Home dedicated the intellectual property and related rights to the collection to the American public, subject to "whatever rights, if any, that may have previously been conveyed to others."' https://www.loc.gov/rr/print/res/258_mats.html (accessed 28 June 2022).

[116] NARA, Record Group 84, consulate post, Aleppo, vol. 126: Alling (U.S. vice-consul) to Mountain Steel Products, Aleppo, 28 July 1926.

vehicle was not an easy task for the road operators when setting up their transport service. The heat, the length of the journey, the stones and gravel that sometimes covered the ground all made it essential to find a vehicle that was sufficiently robust and well-equipped for the desert journey. When looking for the most suitable car for desert conditions, the Nairn and Kettaneh brothers turned to American models. As Nile Green has pointed out, the predominance of American cars on the transdesert route 'was an outcome of the cheapness of Fordist mass-production methods combined with the suitability for desert terrain of cars designed for the rough farm roads of middle America'.[117]

The Nairn and the Kettaneh brothers quickly realised that they could not use just any car for the transdesert service. The report on the expedition led by Norman Nairn in April 1923 (most likely written by British Consul Palmer) noted that the seven-seater Buick, regular Oldsmobile and Lancia used during the expedition had proved quite suitable. More generally, any touring car could make the desert journey as long as it was 'powerful enough to pull its load at high-speed, large enough to accommodate all that has to be put on it' and, above all, 'with sufficient ground-clearance'.[118] A few months later, a French report provided more details on car requirements. The minimum height above the ground was to be 28 centimetres, the chassis reinforced, the rear of the tank well protected, the bodywork securely fixed [and] the engine easily accessible for any possible repairs on the road.[119] Furthermore, the conditions of long-distance travel in the desert imposed specific dispositions. In addition to passengers and mail, the cars had to carry numerous fuel tanks and sufficient oil and water to cover the various stages of the desert journey and possible detours in case drivers lost the track. A standard car needed to carry about 50 gallons (about 190 litres) of fuel. They also required powerful headlights to illuminate the track at night.[120] Before the introduction of vans to carry mail and travellers' belongings, the various containers and luggage were attached to the roof and fixed to each side of the car.[121]

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[117] Nile Green, 'Fordist Connections: The Automotive Integration of the United States and Iran', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 58:2 (2016), p. 303.
[118] TNA, FO 371/9013, 'Report on Reconnaissance by Motor Car from Beyrout via Damascus to Bagdad', drawn up by Major D. McCallum (British liaison officer), Beirut, 1 May 1923.
[119] CADC, 48CPCOM42, 'Caractéristiques que doivent presenter les automobiles destinées à la traversée du Désert Syrien entre Bagdad & Beyrouth', report attached to a letter from High Commissioner Weygand to the French Foreign Minister, Beirut, 1 December 1923.
[120] SALT Research, Nairn Transport Company, 'Motor Transport across the Syrian Desert: Damascus–Baghdad'. https://archives.saltresearch.org/handle/123456789/13850 (accessed 8 April 2022).
[121] Travellers often described the striking appearance of the vehicles in their writings. MECA, Nairn Transport Company Collection, 'Busses Make Trips Over Syria Desert', *Sunday Morning*, 6 September 1925; Raoul Blanchard, 'La route du désert de Syrie', *Annales de Géographie* 34:189 (1925), p. 238.

Consequently, the vehicles capable of carrying all this equipment, in addition to the passengers and mail, were likely to be heavy, which in turn created further problems for desert driving. This situation was summarised in an issue of the *Levant Trade Review* published by the American Chamber of Commerce for the Levant:

> Such a vehicle had to be capable of carrying the necessary heavy loads of gasoline, baggage, mail, etc., and to provide accommodations for two drivers working in shifts. Economical running costs demanded large seating capacity, which meant a large and heavy car, which in turn meant certain trouble in sand and mud, unless the weight per square inch of tire surface on the ground was not more than in the case of the cars already employed.[122]

With a view to introducing a new vehicle that would be large enough to cover the high operating costs, while at the same time not being prone to becoming bogged down, Norman Nairn travelled to the United States of America in late 1923, where he visited the General Motors factories in Detroit. He ordered four Cadillacs, which the brothers had already identified as being well suited for rough terrains while plying their Haifa–Beirut taxi service between 1919 and 1923.[123] Two years later, Norman Nairn returned to the United States to arrange for the construction of a larger vehicle. The Nairn Transport Company six-wheeled coaches, introduced in 1926, were specially designed to be less prone to the jolts involved in driving on desert tracks.[124] For its part, the Eastern Transport Company initially had difficulty finding a car that was both light and powerful enough to cross the desert on the Palmyra route. After several attempts, the Kettaneh brothers adopted five-seater Dodge cars, for which they became the Beirut agents.[125]

Wear and tear

Driving in the desert put a heavy strain on cars, tyres and equipment. While most of the desert tracks ran through flat, terrain that was easy to drive on, the extreme climatic conditions

[122] Digital Library for International Research, The American Chamber of Commerce for the Levant, *The Levant Trade Review*, XIV:12 (December 1926), p. 511. http://www.dlir.org/arit-absc-about/205.html (accessed 12 May 2022).
[123] Christian Phelps Grant, *The Syrian Desert*, p. 275; John Munro, *The Nairn Way*, pp. 30–33, 53–54.
[124] TNA, FO 371/10092, British consulate to the Department of Overseas Trade, Beirut, 6 June 1924; MECA, Nairn Transport Company Collection, 'New Car for the Desert Route', the *Baghdad Times*, 18 February 1926 (Document No. 56); John Munro, *The Nairn Way*, pp. 63–64.
[125] CADC, 48CPCOM42, 'Vers Bagdad', communiqué by the French delegation in Syria, December 1923; NARA, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Persia, 1910-1929, microfilm roll 32, File 891.797, U.S. Vice-Consul Imbrie to the Department of State, Tehran, 26 May 1924; NARA, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Asia, 1910–1929, microfilm roll 16, File 890d.797 90g: U.S. Consul Randolph to the Department of State, Baghdad, 14 April 1925.

and certain rough stretches caused severe wear and tear on the equipment.[126] After crossing the desert in October 1924 at the invitation of the Nairn Transport Company, the acting British vice-consul in Beirut, Norman Mayers, reported the difficulties encountered by the company:

> The whole journey, whether it is the hard desert level in the heat of midday, or painful going in the broken country, or the floods and mud-flats of winter, undoubtedly tells heavily on the cars. Anyone who undertakes the service—above all, if he promises rapid transit—must count on a rapid deterioration of his stock. Nairn sometimes uses up a Rapson tyre in four single journeys.[127]

The Eastern Transport Company faced the same conditions. Francis Kettaneh admitted that the Palmyra route caused his vehicles' tires to wear out very quickly. He could not make more than a dozen one-way trips with Goodyear tyres before having to change them.[128] Extreme desert temperature was identified as a major cause of tyre wear. The high cost incurred by frequent tyre changes prompted the Nairn brothers to look for a new type of tyre. After trying several types that proved ineffective, the brothers concluded that an entirely new model, adapted to the climate of the Syrian Desert, had to be designed, and once again they turned to American companies. The Firestone Tire and Rubber Company responded to the call and sent a specialist into the field, who studied different models and identified the main problem: the standard tyres had a cotton base, which was not resistant to high temperatures. Subsequently, the manufacture of pneumatic tyres greatly extended their period of use.[129]

Like the tyres, the cars themselves had a limited life expectancy.[130] Sturdy cars used on Iraqi roads and tracks were only operational for a period ranging from eight months to one and a half years.[131] The pressure exerted on cars crossing the desert led to frequent breakdowns that required the transport companies' employees to have mechanical knowledge to repair them. The lack of maintenance and inspection of the vehicles was a crucial issue, as recalled by a French expert who travelled in June 1925 with a convoy of the Eastern Transport Company and described in great detail the innumerable incidents they experienced during the journey: countless breakdowns, broken leaf springs and petrol tanks, ruptured piping and so forth. They finally arrived in Damascus late in the evening after to carrying out many makeshift repairs en

[126] John Munro, *The Nairn Way*, pp. 64–65.
[127] TNA, FO 371/10093, 'Report on the Beirut-Bagdad-Tehran Motor Route', drawn up by Acting British Consul Mayers, Beirut, 26 October 1924.
[128] Ibid.
[129] John Munro, *The Nairn Way*, pp. 64–66.
[130] NARA, Record Group 84, consular posts, Baghdad, vol. 87: U.S. Consul Randolph to Goodyear Tire & Rubber Export Co., Baghdad, 10 August 1926.
[131] NARA, Record Group 84, consular posts, Baghdad, vol. 85: U.S. Consul Randolph to the Ford Motor Company d'Italia, Baghdad, 30 September 1926.

route.[132] Travellers on the Baghdad–Damascus route were not always so lucky. Serious breakdowns sometimes resulted in the vehicles being abandoned in the middle of the desert when there was no one to fix them.[133] The considerable number of car wrecks that dotted the transdesert route in the 1920s testifies to the major impact of the desert terrain on the cars and the lack of mechanical knowledge of some of the drivers. In November 1924, the British consul in Damascus pointed out the 'remains of a few derelict cars, chiefly "Ford" cars, on the trans-desert track'.[134] The British vice-consul in Beirut gave a detailed account of the cars he encountered while making a round trip between Beirut and Tehran with the Nairn Transport Company in October 1924. He drew up a list showing the predominance of American vehicles and underlining the large number of distressed and even stranded vehicles.

> Two Dodge cars, one broken down.
>
> One Hudson car, alone.
>
> One Durrant car, abandoned.
>
> One Buick car, which had collided with a passing car in mid-desert and which was awaiting help.
>
> Four Ford cars, not too new, encamped for the night.
>
> A Nairn convoy of three Buicks.
>
> Two Ford cars, going well.
>
> One Hudson car.
>
> Two more Fords.
>
> One Crossley car, stranded near Jebel Tenf.
>
> One solitary Ford, with five passengers.
>
> Two 1-ton lorries, a Talbot and a G.M.C., fitted each with seats for some fifteen passengers, advancing like antediluvian char-à-bancs, 100 miles out of Damascus.
>
> One Reo car, piled high with luggage.
>
> One more Reo, in difficulties.
>
> One more G.M.C. lorry, fitted for passengers.
>
> A Nairn convoy of two cars.[135]

While the desert terrain between Baghdad and Damascus facilitated the development of motorised traffic, together with the climate it also posed a major challenge to transport

[132] CADN, 1SL/1/V/702, 'Note sur les conditions matérielles de transport de Beyrouth à Téhéran et retour' prepared by the Director of the French Trade Office for Syria, Beirut, 1 July 1925.
[133] Francis Kettaneh had to abandon a broken-down car during one of his first desert crossings in November 1923, see Alice Boustany Djermakian, *Une saga libanaise*, p. 57. See also TNA, AIR 23/291, Weekly Report No. AL/10/23 from the special service Officer, Ramadi, 2 January 1925.
[134] TNA, FO 684/1/24/14, Acting British Consul Vaughan-Russell to the Department of Overseas Trade, Damascus, 6 November 1924.
[135] TNA, FO 371/10093, Report by British Vice-Consul Norman Mayers, Beirut, 26 October 1924.

contractors by causing rapid wear and tear of vehicles and tyres, sometimes causing breakdowns and irreparable damage in the desert. In the end, should we not consider that transport entrepreneurs always succeeded in overcoming the constraints of the desert terrain and heat? In *Rule of Experts*, Timothy Mitchell raised this question in relation to a different context and answered it in the following way:

> Still, it might be argued, science one by one solved the problems it encountered. Many of them were overcome, it is true, but then one would have to acknowledge that science did not direct the engineer's work as a preformed intelligence. The projects themselves formed the science. Solutions were worked out on the ground.[136]

The solutions developed by road transport operators were the result of experiments in the field, failures and miscalculations, as well as a series of back-and-forth trips between the desert tracks and the car manufacturing plants in the United States. In other words, the objectives and plans of the actors, the scientific expertise and the practical solutions were only formed 'in combination' with environmental forces.[137] It is crucial to highlight the difficulties, failures and incidents that marked the early development of motor transportation across the Syrian Desert. Doing so draws attention firstly to the 'complexity and fragility' of a process 'made invisible by [its] own success'.[138] Secondly, the agency of the desert terrain and climate, which co-produced the transport system and did not simply 'resist' the expansion of motorised transport, becomes apparent. The following section examines the ways in which the imperial interests of France and Britain played into this process.

An outlet for French and British cars?

French and British Mandate administrators were deeply annoyed by the predominance of American cars on the roads of Syria and Iraq as well as on the desert tracks. At the first sign of expanding traffic, they envisioned the growth of motorised transport across the mandated territories and beyond as an outlet for French and British car manufacturers, respectively. The British, for example, put pressure on the main car dealers in Beirut to become agents for the British Maudslay Motor Company.[139] Furthermore, the Department of Overseas Trade

[136] Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), p. 37.
[137] Ibid., 52.
[138] On Barak, *On Time*, p. 38.
[139] On the French position, see CADC, 48CPCOM42, French Consul Maigret to the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, Baghdad, 20 May 1923 and 12 June 1923. See also Simon Jackson, 'Personal Connections and Regional Networks: Cross-Border Ford Automobile Distribution in French Mandate Syria', in Jordi Tejel and Ramazan Hakkı Öztan, *Regimes of Mobility*, p. 110. On the British position, see TNA, FO 371/10092, British

criticised the Nairn Transport Company for using American vehicles.[140] However, Norman Nairn had actually approached British manufacturers, as was pointed out by Major McCallum, the British liaison officer in Beirut, in a speech delivered to members of the Royal Central Asian Society in London on 14 November 1924:

> Since my return to England, I have talked to many men interested in the motor industry in England about this question, but so far without any profitable results. […] I think I am right in saying that the two main obstacles to the adoption of British cars for the desert service are firstly, financial cost, and secondly, that British cars are built too low in the chassis to avoid the many stones and boulders which the higher-built American cars pass over without risk to engine or axle. I hold no brief for the American motor industry, and naturally I would like to see it possible for British cars to be used by the British concern developing the desert route. The Buick car is sufficiently high-powered to carry the enormous weight which these cars have to carry over the two ranges of mountains and across the desert without overheating. It is built high, and yet is comfortable to ride in. It maintains a high speed for hours and hours on end while running across the desert, and, should it get stuck in a soft place, it is not too heavy to be towed or pushed out. The Cadillac car is more powerful, and more comfortable perhaps than the Buick, and is also more expensive. These cars actually make the trip to Baghdad and back without having to replenish one drop of water in the radiator. […] Surely it should be possible for the British motor industry to produce a car which can compare favourably with the Buick in price, and also conform to the various constructional details necessary, but it seems almost useless to ask for it.[141]

Major McCallum explained that no British company could supply vehicles with sufficient power and chassis height, yet were light enough to be towed when needed and with low water consumption. In the rest of his speech, McCallum stated that Norman Nairn had even been confronted with a refusal by British manufacturers to build a six-wheeler car specifically designed for desert tracks. The lack of suitable models and interest on the British side prompted Norman Nairn to turn to American manufacturers.[142]

On the French side too, the use of French vehicles was encouraged. At first, the French Levant Army considered using two French models in Lebanon and Syria: the Citroën

consulate to the Department of Overseas Trade, Beirut, 6 June 1924. For the Palestinian context, see Jacob Norris, *Land of Progress*, p. 13.

[140] TNA, FO 371/10092, Department of Overseas Trade to Norman Nairn, London, 13 February 1924. Nairn replied that he could not 'risk experimenting with British cars'; see TNA, FO 684/1/24/14, British Consul Satow to the Foreign Office, Beirut, 5 February 1924. The Department of Overseas Trade was not, however, convinced by Norman Nairn's answer; see FO 371/10092, memorandum by Department of Overseas Trade, 25 March 1924.

[141] Major D. McCallum, 'The Discovery and Development of the New Land Route to the East', pp 59–60.

[142] Ibid., pp. 59–60; SALT Research, Nairn Transport Company, 'Motor Transport across the Syrian Desert: Damascus–Baghdad', p. 7. https://archives.saltresearch.org/handle/123456789/13850 (accessed 12 May 2022).

Autochenille and the six-wheeled Renault. To verify André Citroën's claim that his car was a success in North Africa and the Sahara, the Armée du Levant sought the advice of several French officers serving in Morocco. Whereas these officers pointed to the limited practicality of using these vehicles in a rocky terrain, they nevertheless deemed them suitable for desert tracks and a sandy terrain. However, after several trials were performed in Syria, the military authorities concluded that the Citroën and Renault cars were not adapted to the particularities of the Syrian terrain.[143] For his part, High Commissioner Weygand made great efforts in 1923 to encourage French car manufacturers to develop a 'colonial type' of car to meet Syria's demand for cars, that is, a car with a raised chassis. However, he regretted that they showed little interest.[144] In February 1924, the High Commission gave its support to a group of French entrepreneurs who wished to organise a convoy travelling from Beirut to Tehran via Damascus and Bagdad to showcase the region's economic opportunities to French traders and car manufacturers. The convoy, referred to as a '*caravane d'essai économique*' ('economic test caravan') comprised several French-made cars carrying French-manufactured goods.[145]

The French further directed their administrators to use French car brands in Lebanon and Syrie.[146] In addition, they considered creating a French transport company to provide transdesert transport services to ensure the use of French equipment.[147] In late 1924, when the Eastern Transport Company was taken over by a consortium of mainly French investors, the French High Commissioner insisted that they buy new cars in France. The company finally agreed to order several cars from the French factories, Delaunay-Belleville and Panhard & Levassor.[148] Yet the introduction of French equipment into the company's fleet caused many

[143] 48CPCOM42, Memo by Captain Bertrand (French military attaché in Tehran and Kabul), 7 November 1923; SHD/GR 4 H 179/2a, André Citroën to Lieutenant Vigie (Armée du Levant), 19 January 1924; Memo titled 'Observations du chef de service radio', Casablanca, 24 January 1924; Armée du Levant, 'Etude sur les transports automobiles en Syrie' [date unknown, post-1925].
https://www.memoiredeshommes.sga.defense.gouv.fr/en/ark:/40699/e0056546d949d539/56546d95b5d71 (accessed 12 May 2021).

[144] CADC, 48CPCOM42, 'Extrait d'un rapport d'un agent commercial français ayant accompli le voyage Beyrouth-Téhéran par Damas et Bagdad en août 1923 et retour en novembre 1923'; High Commissioner Weygan to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Beirut, 1 December 1923.

[145] CADC, 48CPCOM42, Commandant Veyrier to the French Foreign Minister, Le Vésinet, 25 January 1924 and 13 February 1924; 'Notice sur une nouvelle route en Orient (de la Syrie à la Perse)', January 1924; the French High Commissioner for Syria and Lebanon to the Foreign Minister, Beirut, 20 February 1924.

[146] NARA, Record Group 84, consulate post, Aleppo, vol. 126: Alling (U.S. vice-consul) to Mountain Steel Products, Aleppo, 28 July 1926.

[147] CADC, 48CPCOM42, Director of the Beirut Commercial Office to the (French) National Office of Foreign Trade, Beirut, 5 December 1923.

[148] TNA, FO 371/10093, British Consul Satow to the Department of Overseas Trade, Beirut, 19 August 1924; CADC, 48CPCOM42, the French Finance Minister to the Foreign Minister, Paris, 11 September 1924; NARA, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Persia, 1910–1929, microfilm roll 32, File 891.797, U.S. Vice-Consul Fuller to the Department of State, Tehran, 25 January 1925; NARA,

complications. Mr Kettaneh, head of the company's technical department, requested modifications to the standard models produced by these two manufacturers so that the cars would be suitable for the topographical conditions of the transdesert route. In order to meet his requirements, Panhard & Levassor had to ask its various suppliers to modify their products, but they were slow to respond to these requests. The firm finally delivered the cars in April 1925.[149] The transport company and the High Commission in Beirut complained about the delay and the poor quality of service provided by the French manufacturer. As the High Commissioner pointed out, some of the cars sent by Panhard & Levassor arrived in Syria without spare parts, making it impossible to repair them in case of breakdowns. He described this incident as a real failure of the French industry, which seriously undermined the combined efforts of the company and the High Commission.

> Les usines Panhard ont livré deux voitures sur cinq promises et les ont envoyées sans les pièces de rechange demandées, de sorte qu'une d'entre elles est immobilisée pour des réparations. La ligne Kettaneh ne peut donc assurer ses services au moment où le mouvement des voyageurs est le plus considérable. Les efforts faits par le Haut-Commissariat pour conserver à une ligne française une partie des transports sur l'Asie Centrale et à l'industrie françaises une place digne d'elle sur cette nouvelle voie mondiale se trouvent annihilés par ces retards.[150]

The imperial mindset that drove French officials to insist on the use of French cars conflicted with the topographical reality of the desert and the better suitability of American cars for this terrain. Camille Lyans Cole has documented a strikingly similar situation in her study of steam navigation on the Tigris in the late nineteenth century. She discusses an episode in which British consular officials forced a British contractor to use steamships, despite his insistence that traditional sailing ships were far better suited to the environmental constraints of navigating the Tigris. In this case, as she puts it, 'political and environmental factors combined to cause the precariousness of steamship empire in Iraq'.[151] As in Camille Cole's

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Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Asia, 1910–1929, microfilm roll 16, File 890d.797 90g: U.S. Consul Randolph to the Department of State, Baghdad, 14 April 1925.

[149] CADC, 48CPCOM42, telegram from the French Foreign Ministry to the High Commissioner for Syria and Lebanon, Paris, 26 March 1925; BBTA to the French Foreign Ministry, Beirut, 26 March 1925.

[150] CADC, 48CPCOM42, telegram from High Commissioner Sarrail to the French Foreign Ministry, Beirut, 20 March 1925. Translation: 'The Panhard factories delivered two cars out of five promised and sent them without the requested spare parts, so that one of them is immobilised for repairs. The Kettaneh line is therefore unable to provide its service at a time when the movement of passengers is most considerable. The efforts made by the High Commission to keep a portion of transportation to Central Asia to a French service and to give French industry a proper position on this new world route are being undermined by these delays.'

[151] Camille Lyans Cole, 'Precarious Empires: A Social and Environmental History of Steam Navigation on the Tigris', *Journal of Social History* 50:1 (2016), p. 83.

case study, the failure of the Panhard & Levassor cars demonstrates how the interplay between environmental conditions, technology and imperialism shaped the transport system in a way that did not meet the initial expectations of the various actors, especially those of the Mandate administrators.

Floods and Rainfall

The unsolvable issue of flooding

The desert terrain was not the only environmental feature that affected the transport system between Damascus and Baghdad. Driving conditions during the trip from one of these cities to the other varied considerably according to the seasons. When the Euphrates flooded in the spring, the entire area between Lake Habbaniya and the river was often submerged in water. At times, the rising waters flooded the surroundings of Ramadi and made the terrain impassable for cars. This phenomenon was well known to caravan traders, who would bypass the lake from the south during times of flooding.[152] The British army was aware of the difficulties posed by the rising waters of the Euphrates. As noted in a report written in 1924, 'the liability of the Euphrates to sudden inundation is a factor which military engineers should always bear in mind'. The report distinguished two periods of flooding. The first, which occurred between November and February, was characterised by relatively short floods due to heavy rainfall and the second, between mid-March and June, was a period of heavy flooding due to snowmelt in the mountains of eastern Anatolia that could last for several weeks.[153]

In 1923, the Euphrates completely burst its banks and flooded the entire area between Ramadi and Fallujah. Consequently, the cars from the Nairn and Kettaneh expeditions were unable to reach Ramadi, which became 'an island in the middle of the floods', and they had to make a detour of 130 km through the desert to reach the crossing point in Fallujah. On their arrival, however, they found that the Iraqi authorities had temporarily cut off the boat bridge (or pontoon bridge)[154] for fear that the flood water would wash it away. For some time, a small boat substituted for the boat bridge, carrying passengers from one bank to the other.[155] Later, a flat-bottomed barge was used for this purpose, carrying cars, one at a time, across the Euphrates.

[152] Christina Phelps Grant, *The Syrian Desert*, p. 200.
[153] BL (via QDL), IOR/L/MIL/17/15/43, 'Military Report on Iraq. Area 2 (Upper Euphrates)', p. 7. https://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc_100000000239.0x000163 (accessed 12 May 2022).
[154] It was a collection of boats linked together to form a floating bridge.
[155] LON, R58/1/44571/17502, British Mandate for Iraq: Report on Administration for the Period April 1923 to December 1924, p. 166; Major McCallum, 'The Discovery and Development of the New Land Route to the East', p. 53.

Leaving Iraq for Aleppo in June 1923 at the beginning of his short exile, Abu Tabikh crossed the Euphrates on this boat before making the detour to Ramadi. He covered the distance in about double the usual time because of the increased length of the deviation track and its poor quality.[156] In July, a British traveller coming from Iran had a similar experience. The boat in Fallujah carried the two cars of his convoy to the west bank for eight Rupees each, with the entire operation lasting two and a half hours.[157]

The diversion to the south of Lake Habaniyya during heavy floods—which usually occurred every two years—was a weak link in the transport system because of the considerable length of the track and its reputation as 'one of the worst of desert tracks'.[158] Some transdesert carriers considered alternative routes, such as a track leading to Karbala, south of Baghdad, on to which cars coming from Damascus could be diverted after the carriers had received a telegram from Baghdad announcing the flooding of the Euphrates.[159] This option, however, did not fare any better. As early as 1926, the Fallujah Bridge was deemed unsuitable for the expansion in motorised traffic, as evidenced by discussions during an Iraqi parliamentary session held in May. Although some deputies did not consider the renovation of the bridge to be necessary, the Minister of Public Works insisted on its replacement, stating that the Fallujah Bridge was 'the only bridge connecting Iraq to Syria'. In his view, a bridge that was impassable for cars and regularly destroyed by floods was not acceptable.[160] Thereafter, the Iraqi administration decided to build a steel bridge in Fallujah with a 3.5 metre (12-foot) wide roadway to ease the movement of cars between Bagdad and Ramadi and thus between Iraq and Syria. The construction work, which was contracted to a British company, commenced in 1927.[161] In the spring of 1928, when the construction was still ongoing, another violent flood of the Euphrates inundated the road between Ramadi and Fallujah and destroyed the foundations of the new bridge at Fallujah.[162]

The Nairn Transport Company criticised the British–Iraqi authorities for their lack of commitment and the slow pace of work to improve the road between Baghdad and Ramadi.

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[156] Muhsin Abu Tabikh, *Al-riḥla al-muḥsiniyya*, pp. 17–18.
[157] TNA, FO 371/9013, Report by Ellis Price, attached to a letter from British Consul Vaughan-Russell to the Department of Overseas Trade, Aleppo, 10 July 1923.
[158] Christina Phelps Grant, *The Syrian Desert*, pp. 274, 287.
[159] TNA, FO 371/9013, British Consul Palmer to the Marquess Curzon of Kedleston, Damascus, 24 August 1923.
160 AUB, 'al-waqā'i' al-'irāqiyya: al-jarīda al-rasmiyya li-jumhuriyyat al-'Irāq', Minutes of the Meeting of the Parliament, N° 443, 27 May 1926, p. 10.
[161] NARA, Record Group 54, Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Asia, 1910–1929, microfilm roll 21, File 890G.154/1, Note by U.S. Consul Sloan, Baghdad, 15 January 1932.
[162] TNA, CO 730/135/3, Osborne Mance (Ottoman Bank) to Shuckburgh (the Colonial Office), London, 12 June 1928; NARA, Record Group 54, Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Asia, 1910–1929, microfilm roll 21, File 890G.154/1: U.S. Legation to the Secretary of State, Baghdad, 9 April 1932.

Norman Nairn complained bitterly, noting that the experience of the winter of 1926–1927 had not prompted the authorities to take action to prevent further flooding or at least to limit its adverse consequences. He pointed out that in 1928, only one ferry carried cars across the Euphrates in Fallujah and that flooding continued to affect his company heavily.

> I have had to arrange for the [s]ix-wheelers to stop at Ramadie, and to use touring cars between that place and Baghdad. My brother is now at Ramadie organising the arrival and departure of the [s]ix-wheelers etc. It rather throws our operating arrangements out of gear, and as traffic will be quite heavy up to the end of May, it will considerably add to the expense. Further, the road round the Habbanyeh lake is causing a great deal of trouble with clutches and back axles, due to the very soft sand, and it is impossible to put more than 1½ tons on a Lancia on this road to negotiate it. […] In my opinion, the only thing that the Government of Iraq deserves is a [c]amel service between Damascus and Baghdad.[163]

The last sentence in this quote reflects Norman Nairn's high opinion of himself and the role played by his company. More broadly, however, his evident irritation reveals the extent to which the floods had affected his transport service.

The following year, the flooding of the Euphrates once again interrupted traffic in Fallujah, this time rendering the ferry unusable. For a fortnight, the transdesert convoys had to take the long deviation via Karbala. The Iraqi PWD then set up a ferry service about 15 km upstream from Fallujah, which enabled the cars to avoid the long roundabout, but not the by-pass trip around Lake Habaniyya.[164] The (re)construction of the steel bridge at Fallujah dragged on because of a dispute that arose between the British contractor and the Iraqi government over payment of damages caused by the 1928 flood. The bridge was finally completed in 1932 and opened to traffic in April of the same year at an official event attended by King Faysal. Designed to withstand the flooding of the Euphrates, the new bridge eased car traffic between Iraq and Syria, while enabling heavier vehicles to cross the river.[165] As Christina Phelps Grant observed in her book titled *The Syrian Desert* (1937), 'one of the few hazards of the trip [had] been eliminated' by the steel bridge.[166]

Nonetheless, the land west of the Euphrates continued to be flooded regularly, thereby disrupting transdesert traffic in the years that followed. A British military report from 1936 still observed that flooding of the Euphrates was likely to disrupt and interrupt traffic. Although

[163] TNA, CO 730/135/3, Norman Nairn to General Mance, Beirut, 30 April 1928.
[164] AUB, 'Ṭarīq al-ṣaḥrā', *Al-Bayraq*, 9 May 1929, p. 2; TNA, CO 732/39/11, Economic Report of June 1929.
[165] TNA, FO 481/23, Annual Reports on Iraq for 1932, p. 59; NARA, Record Group 54, Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Asia, 1910–1929, microfilm roll 21, File 890G.154/1: U.S. Legation to the Secretary of State, Baghdad, 9 April 1932.
[166] Christina Phelps Grant, *The Syrian Desert*, p. 273.

earthen bunds had been built applying some masonry, they were not sufficient to contain the rising waters of the Euphrates. Moreover, according to the report, building a high embankment to make the road between Fallujah and Ramadi passable all year round was not an option, as desired by Norman Nairn. The only way to contain the flood was precisely to let the Euphrates flow into the Habbaniya depression, that is, the area between the lake and the river. The long diversion routes remained the only real option in case of flooding.[167] In 1937, the flooding of the Tigris and the Euphrates reached levels not seen since 1923, inundating large areas around Baghdad as well as in the areas between Deir ez-Zor, Ramadi and Fallujah, once again interrupting transdesert traffic and compelling transport operators to find a new route through the flooded areas.[168]

FIGURE 9: FLOODS IN SYRIA, NOVEMBER 1937

Image credit: Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington D.C., 20540 USA. Matson (G. Eric and Edith) Photograph Collection. Creator: American Colony (Jerusalem), unknown photograph. Title: 'Syrian floods, Nov. 2, 1937', 2 November 1937. LC-M33- 10447-N. (No known restrictions).[169]

[167] BL, IOR/L/MIL/17/15/47, 'Military Report on Iraq - Volume II (Routes)', 1936, pp. 26, 186.
[168] AUB, 'Fayaḍān al-furāt wa ṭarīq al-'Irāq Sūriyā', *al-Bilad*, 28 April 1937, p. 4; NARA, Record Group 54, Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Asia, 1910–1929, microfilm roll 18, File 890g.00: 'Rains Interrupting Desert Traffic', *The Iraq Times*, 29 November 1937.
[169] The Library of Congress notes 'no known restrictions on publication' and states that the rights related to the G. Eric and Edith Matson Photograph Collection were transferred to the 'American public' in 2003: 'The Kensington Episcopal Home conveyed the collection to the Library in 1978. In 2003, the Home dedicated the intellectual property and related rights to the collection to the American public, subject to "whatever rights, if any, that may

When the desert turned to mud

Winter rainfall in the desert similarly played havoc with the transdesert transport service. The heavy rains between November and April, and especially in December and January, regularly transformed the desert ground from a flat and hard surface 'into a sea of mud'.[170] The first explorations of the desert route were conducted in dry weather between March and October 1923, when the ground was particularly hard, but some reports already suggested that rain could pose a problem. Major Holt, who explored the southern parts of the Syrian Desert in 1920 and 1921, noted that in some places, 'the desert [was] so flat that a storm of forty minutes' rain turn[ed] the surface into a series of small lakes, through which all [their] Fords had to be manhandled.'[171] A French report pointed out that in January 1924, the pioneers of the transdesert route had perhaps drawn too hasty conclusions about the qualities of the desert terrain and that other observers had pointed out the presence of clayey areas that were likely to become swamps during the winter rains.[172] In some areas of the riparian zones and desert fringes, the soil remained wet for much longer than elsewhere after the rains and could easily become 'a slimy quagmire' as cars passed by.[173]

Some travellers, more fortunate than others, downplayed the impact of the rains on transdesert traffic. For example, in 1925, Major McCallum stated that rain did not disrupt traffic as much as had been imagined, as the wind dried the tracks in only a few hours.[174] Yet the experiences of many travellers prove otherwise. During the 1920s and much of the 1930s, historical sources abound with cases of cars stuck in soft ground after rain; of travellers waiting for the desert to dry out for several hours, and even days, before resuming their journey; and of cars towing other vehicles out of the mud.[175] In November 1926, rain halted the journey of the

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have previously been conveyed to others."' https://www.loc.gov/rr/print/res/258_mats.html (accessed 28 June 2022).

[170] Norman Nairn speaking at the microphone of Arch Curry on New Zealand Broadcasting Service, 1942 (08''15'). Ngā Taonga Sound & Vision, U-series – Middle East Nairn Transport Service, Parts 1-5 (1942). ID 15366 RNZ collection. https://www.ngataonga.org.nz/collections/catalogue/catalogue-item?record_id=192380 (accessed 12 May 2022).

[171] Major Holt, 'Some Journeys in the Syrian Desert', *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society* 10:3 (1923), p. 178.

[172] CADC, 48CPCOM42. 'Rapport d'ensemble sur les possibilités et l'utilité qu'il y aurait de créer un service français de transports réguliers entre Damas-Bagdad et Téhéran', Intelligence Service, Beirut, 5 January 1924

[173] BL, IOR/L/MIL/17/15/47, 'Military Report on Iraq - Volume II (Routes)', 1936, p. 21.

[174] Major D. McCallum, 'The Discovery and Development of the New Land Route to the East', p. 46.

[175] SHD/GR 4H 65/2, Intelligence Report No. 588, *Service des Renseignements*, Beirut, 10 to 17 January 1925; SHD/GR 4 H 65/4, Intelligence Report No. 8, *Service des Renseignements*, Beirut, 26 November 1928 and 10 December 1928; CADC, 43CPCOM43, 'The Rutbah Post', *Baghdad Times*, 5 February 1926; MECA, Nairn Transport Company Collection: '10 Days in the Desert', *The Baghdad Times*, 8 February 1926 and 'Marooned in the Desert', *The Times*, 6 February 1926; NARA, Record Group 84, consulate general, Beirut, vol. 473: Memorandum on Journey from Cairo to Tehran by George Wadsworth (U.S. First Secretary), Teheran, February 1931; AUB, 'Ghazārat miyāh al-'amṭār fī ṭarīq al-'Irāq–Sūriyā', *Al-Bilad*, 25 October 1935, p. 4.

chief engineer of public works in Aleppo on his way back from Baghdad along the Euphrates, together with twenty cars carrying about a hundred travellers. Consequently, the convoy had to be restocked by British aircraft until the ground dried and they could continue on to Aleppo.[176] During November 1926, the heavy rains also made the track between Ramadi and Rutbah impassable for several days, prompting the Iraqi police to ban traffic so as to prevent cars from getting stranded. The British authorities also informed officials in Damascus not to let any more convoys leave for Iraq. As the Rutbah police could no longer be supplied through the usual channels, planes had to drop supplies from the air. At the end of the month, the cars were able to leave Rutbah, but the remaining portion of the road between Ramadi and Baghdad remained impassable for a few more days.[177]

The heavy rains of November 1926 fuelled a demand for better roads. In the years that followed, the Iraqi PWD began paving and asphalting the road between Fallujah and Ramadi.[178] However, it was not until the second half of the 1930s that the Syrian and Iraqi PWDs built an all-weather road across the desert (see Chapter 3). From 1934 onwards, each government undertook to pave and asphalt the section of the desert route lying in its territory. Work on surfacing the desert tracks took a couple of years to complete, during which time seasonal rainfalls continued to disrupt transdesert traffic.[179] The 1935 Annual Report on Iraq prepared by the British Embassy in Baghdad noted that '[i]n December, unexpectedly heavy rains repeatedly hampered desert traffic and many buses and lorries were bogged. However, thanks to skilful drivers and the use of tractors in the muddiest region, the Nairn Transport Company managed to maintain a reasonably reliable service.'[180]

The disruptive impacts of rains and floods on transdesert traffic shatter the triumphalist narrative of the conquest of the Syrian Desert by automotive technology. The smooth operation of the transport system was contingent on the intensity of the Euphrates floods and the winter rains throughout the interwar period. The annual flooding of the Euphrates posed a serious challenge to the establishment of a fast, safe and regular transport service between Damascus

[176] Global Press Archive, 'Ra'īs muhandisī al-ashghāl al-'āma', *Sūriya al-Shamāliyya*, 17 November 1926, p. 4. https://gpa.eastview.com/crl/mena/ (accessed 12 May 2022).
[177] TNA, FO 371/12269, extract from Economic Report No. 71, attached to the Colonial Office's letter of 26 January 1927.
[178] LON, R2318/6A/28249/655, Colonial Office, S*pecial Report to the Council of the League of Nations on the Progress of Iraq during the Period 1920–1931* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office 1931), pp. 138–139.
[179] TNA, FO 481/23, Annual Report on Iraq for 1935, attached to a letter from Clark Kerr to Eden, 31 January 1936; AUB, 'Al-suyūl fī-l-ṣaḥrā' tuḥāṣir al-sayyārāt', *Al-Bilad*, 8 January 1936, p. 5; CADN, 1SL/1/V/1915, Weekly Newsletter No. 43, French delegation in Syria, *Contrôle Bédouin*, Palmyra, 23 December 1936; NARA, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Asia, microfilm roll 18, File 890g.00/111: summary of the local press, 'Rains Interrupting Desert Traffic', *The Iraq Times*, 29 November 1937.
[180] TNA, FO 481/23, Annual Report on Iraq for 1935, British Embassy, Baghdad, p. 47.

and Baghdad. Similarly, seasonal rainfalls exposed travellers and drivers to hardship, delays and dangers, while compromising 'the almost clock-work regularity' of the Nairn Transport Company's service.[181] The vagaries of the weather not only caused disruptions but they also introduced a certain degree of uncertainty into transdesert traffic. Rains and flooding made the infrastructural system of the Baghdad–Damascus route precarious.[182]

Conclusion

Between 1923 and 1927, the Baghdad–Damascus route became established as the most popular route between Syria and Iraq, overtaking the other transdesert routes that passed through Deir ez-Zor and rerouting transregional mobility. The growing movement of people and mail between Baghdad and Damascus, in both directions, rested on a transport system comprising vehicles, companies, rest stations and shared knowledge, which took shape over the years. A conception of the transdesert route as a system, developed in this chapter, has allowed for a broader picture in which different factors that contributed to the emergence of this new route are foregrounded. Consequently, the isolation of an ultimate cause—be it automotive technology or French and British expansionism—that would have naturally intensified movements across the desert was avoided. On the contrary, the chapter has shown that the history of the Baghdad–Damascus route resists the narratives of imperial and environmental conquest that prevail in the descriptions of (mainly French and British) contemporary actors. Although imperial expansionism and technological acceleration were a strong impetus for the development of the transdesert route, the final state of the infrastructural system was the outcome of an entanglement of various human and non-human factors.

The environmental dispositions of the Syrian Desert offered opportunities and constraints for the expansion of motorised transport. The nature of the terrain enabled the rapid development of motorised transport in certain regions of the Syrian Desert and prevented its expansion in others, such as the area between Haifa, Amman and Baghdad. Moreover, the environment shaped the formation of the infrastructural system of the Baghdad–Damascus route in multiple ways. The desert surface between Damascus and Baghdad allowed for the rapid development of automobile traffic, primarily through the initiative of merchants and entrepreneurs rather than through state-led road construction. It also played a part in the abandonment of the transdesert railway project. On the other hand, road transport entrepreneurs

[181] Quote: Major D. McCallum, 'The Discovery and Development of the New Land Route to the East', p. 56.
[182] Camille Lyans Cole, 'Precarious Empires', p. 83.

faced many difficulties and challenges in establishing a transport service. The small wadis, the lava belt in the southern part of the desert, the muddy surface after rain, the heat during the day and the floods—all of these environmental dispositions placed constraints of the development of transdesert traffic. The chapter has shown how the various actors concerned with the development of the Baghdad–Damascus route made repeated and sometimes unsuccessful attempts, adapted to local conditions, revised their plans and objectives, sought technologies more suited to local realities and introduced new equipment. While they succeeded in overcoming certain environmental constraints, they did not 'submit the world to their intentions'; rather, they acquired knowledge and developed expertise in the field, in interaction with environmental forces.[183]

Nevertheless, they were unable to cope with seasonal weather conditions. The annual rains and frequent flooding of the Euphrates regularly disrupted transdesert traffic, causing delays in the delivery of mail and the transport of passengers, while also putting travellers and drivers at risk. In this respect, the transport system along the Baghdad–Damascus route remained precarious throughout the interwar period, as it could be disturbed at any time during the period from November to May, forcing the road operators to improvise a new route or exposing them to the dangers of a forced stop in the desert. The environmental precariousness of the transdesert transport system contrasts with the descriptions of the 'conquest' of the Syrian Desert provided by contemporary local and imperial actors. As this chapter has shown, climatic and topographical factors worked against the expectations of some entrepreneurs and those of the Mandate authorities.

Finally, two case studies presented in this chapter illustrate the interplay of environment, technology and imperialism in the formation of the Baghdad–Damascus route. The first was France's deep imperial concern to develop the trade in French-made cars in the region, which prompted the Mandate authorities in Beirut to force French-owned transport companies to use French vehicles despite their unsuitability for use on rough and desert terrains. The second was the nature of the rugged, volcanic southern part of the Syrian Desert, which made it impossible for the British to open a transdesert route that would only pass through territories under their control. Thus, the main transdesert route between the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf spanned territories administered by the French and British, respectively, whose mutual interest in this emerging transport system required their cooperation. British and French imperial zones

[183] Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts*, pp. 30–34.

in the Middle East were thus 'entangled through infrastructure'.[184] The development of this route evidently constituted a Franco-British 'community of interest' which, as the following chapters will show, prompted collaboration between the two Mandate powers.

[184] John Perry, 'A Shared Sea: The Axes of French and British Imperialism in the Mediterranean, 1798–1914', in James R. Fichter (ed.), *British and French Colonialism in Africa, Asia and the Middle East*, pp. 113–130.

Chapter 2 – Organising Traffic: Highway Robbers, Insecurity and Cross-Border Cooperation

> It is characteristic of the uncertainty of all desert routes that the trouble began the very next day after I had reported to the High Commissioner at Bagdad that no robbery had been known on the Deir Ez Zor route for any months, and that it might be considered as safe as any other.[1]

Introduction

In November 1928, the Lebanese newspaper *Al-Bayraq* reported on the misadventure of a group of travellers who had just arrived in Beirut from Baghdad, as recounted by one of the drivers on his arrival. Two cars left Baghdad on 14 January and travelled safely as far as Rutbah. On 16 January, one of the cars broke down after they had travelled a distance of 100 km but was repaired fairly easily. Subsequently the drivers were stopped by a group of armed men in two cars, who stole the travellers' money, luggage, personal belongings and fuel and stripped them. The small group later got lost and wandered in the desert for four days. Finally, they were found by a member of a tribe and taken to the shaykh, Malham Sha'lan, who offered them hospitality and escorted them to Damascus.[2] The journey through the desert could have been fatal for these drivers and their passengers. The account given in *Al-Bayraq* testifies to the many dangers to which travellers between Baghdad and Damascus were exposed, some of which have already been highlighted in the previous chapter. The possibilities of cars breaking down, losing the track and being attacked caused great insecurity among users of the transdesert routes in the 1920s.

This chapter offer a new perspective on the development of the Baghdad–Damascus route viewed through the lens of insecurity. In doing so, it focuses, in particular, on the phenomenon of highway robbery, which severely hampered transdesert traffic by making the desert journey highly unsafe. The profiles of highway robbers are often difficult to ascertain from the sources, as are their motivations, which could also be diverse.[3] Various attacks on

[1] TNA, FO 684/2/25/87, British Consul Hough to the Foreign Office, Aleppo, 16 October 1925.
[2] AUB, 'I'tidāʾ fī-l-ṣaḥrā'', *Al-Bayraq*, 30 November 1928, p. 2.
[3] About the 'mix of motives' of bands operating in the borderlands of northern Syria during the interwar years, see Katharina Lange, 'Contested Terrain: Cross-Border Violence, Politics and Memory in Syria's Kurd Dagh Region', in Jordi Tejel and Ramazan Hakkı Öztan (eds.), *Regimes of Mobility: Borders and State Formation in the Middle East, 1918-1946* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), p. 184.

convoys were evidently carried out by members of nomadic groups, who migrated seasonally across the Syrian Desert and attempted to adapt to the new forms of transdesert mobility. Other robberies were committed by individuals practising a form of 'subsistence banditry' akin to the occasional attacks on travellers in the Syrian–Turkish border areas and the Jebel Druze described by Jean-David Mizrahi.[4] In addition, some of the highway robberies committed during the Great Syrian Revolt (1925–1926) and its aftermath were the work of insurgents who sought to undermine the French Mandate power and finance their rebellion. In their reports and correspondence, however, the French and British administrations frequently referred to highway robbers as 'brigands', 'bandits' and sometimes as 'Bedouin', but rarely as 'insurgents'. Notably, as Daniel Neep has pointed out, 'banditry' was 'an ill-defined term used by the French to categorise phenomena ranging from assaults on isolated travellers to the looting of villages to attacks that specifically targeted the Mandatory Power'.[5]

An examination of the phenomenon of highway robbery reveals that the development of the Baghdad–Damascus route was shaped at the intersection of transdesert mobility and local desert dynamics. It should be clarified at the outset of this chapter that encounters between transdesert travellers and Bedouin tribes were by no means always conflictual.[6] Nevertheless, it is this type of encounter that will be examined in this chapter. Following on from Chapter 1, this chapter shows firstly that the Syrian Desert was not simply a surface for cars to drive across. Just as the desert terrain helped to shape transdesert traffic, so too did the people for whom this space was a place of temporary residence and grazing for their herds or a place of refuge. Secondly, the chapter extends the argument made earlier about the fragility of the transdesert transport system. Both chapters thus highlight the challenges, disruptions and failures of the transport system.

Looking at the emergence of the Baghdad–Damascus route through the prism of insecurity offers new insights into the formation and operation of the transport system that reduced the travelling distance between Baghdad and Damascus to a two-day drive. Lack of security was a major challenge for companies and travellers as well as for the police forces and Mandate administrators in Syria and Iraq, which compounded the difficulties caused by the

[4] Jean-David Mizrahi, *Genèse de l'Etat mandataire : Service des Renseignements et bandes armées en Syrie et au Liban dans les années 1920* (Paris : Publications de la Sorbonne, 2003), pp. 115–149.
[5] Daniel Neep, *Occupying Syria under the French Mandate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 75.
[6] The French and British diplomatic archives, the local press and various travel accounts make note of happier and more collaborative encounters between travellers and Bedouin. These forms of mutual assistance have not been included in this chapter. For one such case, see Anthony B. Toth, 'The Transformation of a Pastoral Economy: Bedouin and States in Northern Arabia, 1850-1950' (PhD thesis, University of Oxford, 2000), p. 170 (footnote no. 50).

desert terrain and climate conditions and contributed to the precariousness of the transdesert transport system. The numerous highway robberies directly affected traffic by deterring travellers and merchants from crossing the desert. However, they also indirectly influenced the transport system by prompting French and British officials to organise and regulate transdesert traffic. In turn, French and British attempts to secure the transdesert routes brought new restrictions on transdesert mobility in the 1920s. The chapter thus demonstrates that the intensification of movements between Syria and Iraq went hand in hand with increasing regulation and restrictions on mobility, which challenged hopes and expectations relating to the development of motorised transport at the time. In the wake of the First World War, automobiles offered the promise of fast, unhindered mobility made possible by 'autonomous' machines, that is, 'self-propelled' machines that did not require tracks and would enable people to move more freely and quickly between the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf, just like on European roads.[7] In the late 1920s, however, the prospects for free movement and speed were somewhat dim on the Baghdad–Damascus route.

In addition, a study of the phenomenon of highway robbery offers an entry point into exploring 'the dynamic interaction between state and local actors' in the borderlands and how these interactions influenced state formation in the modern Middle East.[8] This chapter examines how nomadic groups, bandits and rebels undermined French and British policies to secure the transdesert routes and, conversely, how highway robbery led to the strengthening of state power in the borderlands and increased interstate cooperation. Building on the scholarship on borderlands, several historians have investigated the mutually constitutive relationships between states and nomadic tribes in the borderlands of Syria and Iraq. The consolidation of the nation-states of Iraq and Syria was accompanied by sustained efforts, with limited results, to secure the border zones and control the movements of (mainly) tribal populations. Martin Thomas has highlighted the weakness of state power in the borderlands, stating that '[in] the deserts of the Fertile Crescent, the colonial state meant little'.[9] He has argued that a lack of capacity initially compelled the French and British to seek conciliation with the nomadic groups by maintaining tribal customary law and supporting certain shaykhs. Subsequently, this approach gave way to one that entailed the strengthening of a 'system of security intelligence',

[7] Mike Featherstone, 'Automobilities: An Introduction', *Theory, Culture & Society* 21:4-5 (2004), pp. 1–2; John Urry, 'The 'System' of Automobility', *Theory, Culture & Society* 21:4-5 (2004), p. 26.
[8] Matthew H. Ellis, *Desert Borderland: The Making of Modern Egypt and Libya* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2018), p. 8.
[9] Martin Thomas, 'Bedouin Tribes and the Imperial Intelligence Services in Syria, Iraq and Transjordan in the 1920s', *Journal of Contemporary History* 38:4 (2003), p. 553.

even though the policy of cooperation was not entirely abandoned.[10] Daniel Neep has shown that the French practice of associating certain shaykhs with the maintenance of law and order also stemmed from the transfer of experience acquired by the French colonial administration in North Africa. However, in his view, this policy failed in Syria because the shaykhs only had limited influence over their fellows. Thus, in 1921, the French created the *Contrôle Bédouin* and subsequently several *Méhariste* (mounted camel) companies; both groups, despite their differences, used coercion to police the desert.[11] Overall, the policy of the Mandate powers towards nomadic groups evolved over time, with the 1930s seeing the development of more direct state control in the desert and increased efforts to police Bedouin practices.[12]

Furthermore, historical scholarship has shown that nomadic groups often succeeded in advancing their interests. Robert S. G. Fletcher has shown that they took advantage of the 'obscured sovereignty' of the Mandatory rule by crossing borders and changing alliances to achieve their goals.[13] A number of PhD studies have also highlighted the role of Bedouin tribes in the formation of post-Ottoman Middle Eastern states. Anthony B. Toth, Carl Shook and Laura Stocker have shown that French and British efforts to police the tribal groups played an important role in strengthening territorial sovereignty and consolidating their control over the Syrian–Iraqi borderlands during the inter-war period. That said, their research has also demonstrated the role played by tribal shaykhs by illuminating the ways in which they were able to assert their own interests.[14] As Laura Stocker puts it, 'the Bedouin were not merely objects of negotiations between state governments but rather pursued their own objectives. Increasing state rivalries and their free movement across state borders allowed them to advance their political and economic interests within different states.'[15] This chapter builds on this recent scholarship to examine the interactions between non-elite groups (nomads, bandits and insurgents) and state officials and administrators. The chapter shows that highway robbers not only thwarted French and British economic and strategic interests in the development of the Baghdad–Damascus route but they also challenged state power in the desert borderlands. At

[10] Ibid., pp. 539–561.
[11] Daniel Neep, 'Policing the Desert: Coercion, Consent and the Colonial Order', in *Policing and Prisons in the Middle East: Formation of Coercion*, eds. Laleh Khalili and Jillian Schwedler (London: Hurst & Company, 2010), pp. 41–56; Daniel Neep, *Occupying Syria under the French Mandate*, pp. 166–198.
[12] Laura Stocker, 'The "Camel Dispute": Cross-border Mobility and Tribal Conflicts in the Iraqi-Syrian Borderland, 1929-1934', in Jordi Tejel and Ramazan Hakkı Öztan (eds.), *Regimes of Mobility*, pp. 319–350.
[13] Robert S. G. Fletcher, *British Imperialism and 'The Tribal Question'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).
[14] Carl Bryant Shook, 'The Origins and Development of Iraq's National Boundaries, 1918-1932: Policing and Political Geography in the Iraq-Nejd and Iraq-Syria Borderlands' (PhD thesis, The University of Chicago, 2018); Laura Stocker, 'The "Camel Dispute"', pp. 319–350; Anthony B. Toth, 'The Transformation of a Pastoral Economy', pp. 153–213.
[15] Laura Stocker, op. cit., p. 350.

times, convoy attacks were even a deliberate form of contestation of imperial rule, as was evident during the Great Syrian Revolt, showing that while the growth of transdesert traffic served the interests of the Mandate administrations, it also provided an opportunity to challenge their power.[16]

Finally, by examining how the French and British sought to establish common regulations and modes of action to tackle the prevailing insecurity, this chapter sheds new light on how the Baghdad–Damascus route connected the Mandate states of Syria and Iraq. In doing so, it provides a case study of how dependence on the same transport infrastructure, described in the previous chapter, prompted the Mandate states to cooperate.[17] Robert S. G. Fletcher has shown that state borders did not matter to the British administrators who ran the 'desert corridor' between Iraq, Transjordan, Palestine and Egypt and that cooperation in 'managing movement' was considered essential in this desert region.[18] Indeed, French and British imperial concerns encouraged practices that transcended state borders. However, the question of cooperation looks somewhat different in the context of the Baghdad–Damascus route. Firstly, the underlying rivalry between the French and British administrations persisted despite the need to collaborate. Secondly, these administrators were preoccupied with ensuring their claims to territorial sovereignty. The development of the Baghdad–Damascus route raised issues of territoriality that were otherwise of little concern to French and British officials as far as this desert stretch of the Syrian-Iraqi border was concerned. The chapter demonstrates that the insecurity of transdesert traffic led the French and the British to engage in a form of 'competitive cooperation'[19], but also to abandon hard-line claims to territorial sovereignty.

Laying the Ground for Cooperation

In the early 1920s, the various promoters of transdesert traffic viewed the difficulty entailed in finding one's way through the desert and getting help in case of trouble as key sources of danger. In April 1923, in his letter to the Foreign Secretary, the British consul in

[16] In a different context of the late Ottoman period, Fulya Özkan has shown that the development of the Trabzon–Bayezid road was not only a 'means of establishing state power, but also an arena that provided the space to contest that power'. Fulya Özkan, 'Gravediggers of the Modern State: Highway Robbers on the Trabzon-Bayezid Road, 1850s-1910s', *Journal of Persianate Studies* 7:2 (2014), p. 225.

[17] For studies on cooperation, mutual influence and mimicry between the French and British empires, see Volker Barth and Roland Cvetkovski, *Imperial Co-operation and Transfer, 1870-1930: Empires and Encounters* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015); James R. Fichter (ed.), *British and French Colonialism in Africa, Asia and the Middle East: Connected Empires across the Eighteenth to the Twentieth Centuries* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

[18] Robert S. G. Fletcher, 'Running the Corridor: Nomadic Societies and Imperial Rule in the Inter-War Syrian Desert', *Past & Present* 220:1 (2013), pp. 185–215.

[19] Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo and Damiano Matasci, 'Imperialism, Internationalism and Globalisation in Twentieth Century Africa', p. 794.

Damascus noted that a car had broken down in the desert a month earlier and that 'the occupants had to walk back, half-dead from starvation and thirst'. Other such incidents convinced him that cars should never travel alone through the desert.[20] In 1923, the growth of traffic between Damascus and Baghdad prompted the Mandate authorities in Syria and Iraq to consider introducing traffic regulations to keep travellers safe. In July of that year, the High Commissioner for Iraq, Henry Dobbs, shared a proposal with his French counterpart to protect travellers and relieve governments of responsibility for any unfortunate incidents that could occur.

> I propose that visas should only be granted for this route to adequately rationed cars running in convoys of not less than two, whose departure and arrival will be notified to the Syrian and Iraq authorities respectively and on the establishment of this system in co-operation with the French administration, that it should be publicly notified that neither the Iraq nor the Syrian Governments will accept responsibility in the case of travellers by this route who do not conform to the said regulations. If these safeguards are insisted on, I consider that a mechanical breakdown upon this route need not have serious consequences.[21]

As the French responded positively, the British Inspector General of Police in Iraq went to Damascus in November 1923 to meet with French police officers.[22] Together they drafted a regulation whose provisions echoed the proposals made by Henry Dobbs a few months earlier, as evidenced by the decree issued by the Governor of Damascus on 6 February 1924. All cars travelling between Damascus and Baghdad were now required to travel in a convoy of at least two vehicles, to hold a traffic permit certifying that the vehicle had passed an official examination and to be accompanied by a guide recognised by the PWD. Finally, the convoy leader had to inform the headquarters of the fire brigade in Baghdad by telegraph of the date and time of departure of his convoy before leaving Damascus.[23] On 21 September 1924, the Iraqi government legislated similar measures in the Motor Vehicles Travelling Passes Law, which introduced the requirement to travel in convoys, to be accompanied by a guide and to inform the competent authorities in Syria of any departure across the desert.[24]

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[20] TNA, FO 684/1/23/1, 'New Desert Motor-Routes from Baghdad to Damascus and Baghdad-Palmyra-Damascus', the British consul's report sent to the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Damascus, 24 April 1923.
[21] TNA, FO 684/1/23/1, High Commissioner Dobbs to Secretary of State for the Colonies, Baghdad, 4 July 1923.
[22] LON, R58/1/17502/44571, Report on the Administration of Iraq for the Period April 1923 – December 1924, p. 42; TNA, CO 935/1/11, 'Report of the High Commissioner on the Development of Iraq, 1920-1925,' drawn up by Henry Dobbs (High Commissioner for Iraq), 6 August 1925, p. 29.
[23] TNA, FO 684/1/23/1, 'Arrêté n°22 règlementant la circulation automobile sur le territoire de l'Etat de Damas entre la Syrie et la Mésopotamie', 6 February 1924.
[24] TNA, AIR 5/408, High Commissioner Dobbs to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Baghdad, 10 September 1925; AUB, 'Shurūṭ al-safar bayna sūriyya wa-l-'irāq', *Lisan al-hal*, 5 March 1924, p. 2.

In a way, the requirement for cars to travel in a convoy replicated the principle on which the caravan trade was based, namely regrouping people crossing the desert to ensure their safety. As an American journalist travelling in Syria and Iraq in the mid-1920s noted, the regulations created 'motor caravans' or even 'automobile trains'.[25] To be sure, transport companies and drivers maintained informal arrangements to make desert crossings as safe as possible. A passenger who travelled with the Nairn Transport Company recounted in his travelogue that the drivers used the headlights of their cars to communicate with each other from far: 'One flash of the powerful lights gave the message "All right, go ahead." Two flashes, "trouble."'[26] In addition, travellers reported that within this relatively uniform landscape, tins and oil cans discarded along the tracks were the best landmarks for drivers.[27] Nevertheless, the safety regulations of 1923–1924 marked the beginning of the increasing organisation of transdesert traffic by the Mandate states in subsequent years.

The question of highway robbery also prompted state officials in Syria and Iraq to cooperate to secure the transdesert routes. In the summer of 1922, French and British military officers held meetings to discuss ways of providing protection for caravans and motorised convoys on the Aleppo–Ramadi–Baghdad route and the Aleppo–Deir ez-Zor–Mosul route. Discussions touched on the issue of the *khāwa*, the tax traditionally levied by nomadic groups on travellers and smaller tribes crossing their territory in exchange for protection. The British recognised that this practice was ancient and customary but felt that it had become excessive.

> The right of the Beduin to levy tolls on passing caravans is based on a custom which has existed from time immemorial. During and immediately subsequent to the war, however, when Government control over the Beduin was practically non-existent, there was no check on the scale of tolls thus levied, and the extortions of the shaikhs resulted in a general paralysis of trade.[28]

The British officers considered that increased state control in the border region between Deir ez-Zor and Mosul would curb the nomadic tribes' tendency to extort money from travellers and merchants. The negotiations with the French resulted in the Coux–Flaxman Agreement, which entailed the introduction of escorts on horses to accompany the caravans twice monthly between

[25] Robert J. Casey, *Baghdad and Points East* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1928), pp. 6, 44.
[26] Joe Mitchell Chapple, *To Bagdad and Back* (New York: The Century Co., 1928), p. 57.
[27] TNA, FO 371/10093. 'Report on the Beirut-Tehran Motor Route', drawn up by Norman Mayers (British acting vice-consul, Tehran), attached to a letter from British Consul Satow, Beirut, 26 October 1924; 'Abd al-Wahhāb 'Azzām, *Riḥlāt* (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-risāla, 1939), p. 35; Joe Mitchell Chapple, *To Bagdad and Back* (New York: The Century Co., 1928), p. 57.
[28] LON, R58/1/17502/30195, Report on Iraq Administration, April 1922–March 1923, pp. 42–44. Almost the same sentence can be found in TNA, FO 371/7851, Percy Cox (High Commissioner for Iraq) to the French High Commissioner, Baghdad, 22 September 1921.

Mosul and Deir ez-Zor. The escorted caravans left each of the two cities at the same time and met halfway at a place known as Al-Bidea. Car drivers were asked to adapt to the movements of the caravans and their escorts.[29] Although the measures taken at the time did not prove very effective, the discussions held in 1922 endorsed the common view of French and British officials that the security of the desert routes depended on 'co-operation between the Governments of Iraq and Syria', as stated in the British report on Iraq submitted to the League of Nations.[30]

Mutual recognition of the need for cooperation led to the first cross-border conference the following year held at Al-Qa'im, just south-east of the Syrian–Iraqi border as temporarily defined by the 1920 Franco–British Convention. Held from 6 May to 12 May 1923, the Al-Qa'im Conference brought together French and British military officers, Syrian and Iraqi officials and leaders of the main Bedouin tribes. It aimed to settle existing disputes between nomadic tribes residing in the Syrian–Iraqi borderlands, to resolve the issue of cross-border raids and to address the complaints of merchants and travellers levelled against the tribes. The resolution of intertribal conflicts and, more broadly, the maintenance of law and order in the Syrian–Iraqi borderlands were seen as being closely linked to the security of transdesert traffic. During the conference, the delegates sought to harmonise French and British positions on the Bedouin practice of levying the *khāwa*. The French insisted that they wished to ban this custom everywhere, even though they subsequently did not uphold this position consistently.[31] Whereas the French and British delegates agreed to ban the *khāwa* on the Deir ez-Zor–Mosul route, they failed to reach an agreement on the recently opened transdesert route between Damascus and Baghdad. A specific stumbling block during the discussions hinged on the question of whether or not to involve the tribal shaykhs in the policing of the desert. While both Mandate powers valued cooperation, this did not prevent differences from arising over how to achieve the common goal of securing transdesert traffic. The next section examines the extent to which French and British administrators relied on non-state actors and, in particular, tribal shaykhs to ensure the security of motorised convoys.[32]

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[29] Ibid. On the measures taken to secure traffic between Deir ez-Zor and Ramadi, see TNA, FO 371/7851, Report by Captain Reed (divisional advisor, Ramadi) attached to a letter from Major Gillian to the advisor to the Ministry of Interior, 20 June 1922.

[30] TNA, FO 371/7851, Statement signed by Coux and Flaxman, Mosul, 31 July 1922, enclosed in a letter from Cox (High Commissioner, Baghdad) to Winston Churchill (Secretary of State for the Colonies), 18 August 1922; LON, R58/1/17502/30195, Report on the Iraq Administration, April 1922–March 1923, pp. 42–44.

[31] On this particular point, see Laura Stocker, 'The "Camel Dispute"', pp. 319–350.

[32] CADN, 1SL/1/V/588, 'Compte rendu détaillé des travaux de la conférence d'El Qaim', prepared by the French delegates to the conference, 23 May 1923; LON, S13-13-D8, 'Convention proposée pour assurer la sécurité des principales routes commerciales entre la Syrie et l'Irak', 12 May 1923. For details on the French prohibition of the

Influential Brokers and the Politics of Co-optation

Fahd ibn Hadhdhal

Discussions at the Al-Qa'im Conference focused especially on the status of Fahd ibn Hadhdhal, an important shaykh of the 'Amarat tribal groups that belonged to the 'Anaza confederation. Despite French insistence, the British refused to forbid Fahd ibn Hadhdhal from collecting the *khāwa* in Iraqi territory and proposed instead to put him in charge of the security of the Baghdad–Damascus route.[33] As the British High Commissioner for Iraq explained in more detail a few months later, co-opting Fahd ibn Hadhdhal was a good way to maintain security along the Baghdad–Damascus route, as the 'Anaza tribe was present there between November and May, and the shaykh was already receiving an allowance from the government.[34] His decision stemmed from pre-existing alliance with Ibn Hadhdhal. During the First World War, the 'Amarat had taken a stand in favour of the British and developed an interdependent relationship. Ibn Hadhdhal and the 'Amarat helped the British to conduct a blockade against the caravans that carried supplies for Ottoman troops across the Syrian Desert, in return receiving moral and financial support as well as privileged access to the markets of Mesopotamia now under British control. As Robert S. G. Fletcher puts it, the 'Amarat managed not only to adapt to the military and political transformations of the late 1910s but they were also able to take advantage of the situation as real 'political actors' demonstrating agency.[35] From the above, it is clear that the British adopted different strategies to provide security in the desert borderlands of Iraq. Whereas they decided to secure the lands between Mosul and Deir ez-Zor by establishing police stations, patrols and escorts and by prohibiting the collection of the *khāwa* in the borderlands between Ramadi and Damascus, they initially privileged a strategy of 'patronage' which has been well documented by historians.[36]

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khāwa, see also TNA, FO 371/7851, Report by Captain Reed (divisional advisor, Ramadi) attached to a letter from Gillan (advisor to the Ministry of Interior) to the High Commissioner for Iraq, Baghdad, 20 June 1922.

[33] CADN, 1SL/1/V/588, 'Compte rendu détaillé des travaux de la conférence d'El Qaim', prepared by the French delegates to the conference, 23 May 1923.

[34] TNA, FO 684/1/23/1, High Commissioner Dobbs to the Secretary of States for the Colonies, Baghdad, 4 July 1923.

[35] Robert S. G. Fletcher, 'The ʿAmārāt, their Sheikh, and the Colonial State: Patronage and Politics in a Partitioned Middle East', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 58:1-2 (2015), pp. 163–199, here: p. 194; Robert S. G. Fletcher, 'When Nomads Flee: 'Raider', 'Rebel' and 'Refugee' in Southern Iraq, 1917–30', in Jordi Tejel and Ramazan Hakkı Öztan (eds.), *Regimes of Mobility*, pp. 293–294.

[36] Ibid. See also Martin Thomas, 'Bedouin Tribes and the Imperial Intelligence Services in Syria, Iraq and Transjordan in the 1920s', *Journal of Contemporary History* 38:4 (2003), p. 553.

The French, however, were reluctant to accept the British proposal. Captain Terrier understood that the British relied heavily on Fahd ibn Hadhdhal and that they wish to treat him considerately. Nevertheless, he objected to a shaykh being given the task of securing the borderlands and transdesert traffic, arguing that this was the responsibility of the Iraqi government.[37] Yet associations with tribes were not new to French politics. After occupying the Syrian interior in 1920, the French administration awarded subsidies and land to the main shaykhs of the Ruwalla and the Fed'an ('Anaza confederation) to ensure their cooperation, thus perpetuating a practice inherited from Ottoman times but also from the French colonial experience in Africa.[38] By 1923, however, this '*politique des grands chefs*' had lost some of its appeal among the French administrators, who were frustrated by the lack of influence of the great tribal shaykhs over their people in Syria, unlike in Morocco.[39] Captain Terrier's reluctance was bound up with this context, but also with the recent creation of the *Contrôle Bédouin* (CB), an organisation specialising in tribal control in which he was a key figure. The CB was formed in 1921 and comprised a group of officers previously employed by the *Service des Renseignements* (SR), who were tasked with the collection of information on nomadic tribes and with responsibility for ensuring security along the migration routes. In the steppe and desert borderlands, the CB was assisted by detachments of *Méhariste* (mounted camel) companies stationed in Palmyra and Deir ez-Zor, charged with travelling back and forth across the desert to maintain order.[40] From 1923 onwards, the *Méhariste* companies were also equipped with armoured cars in response to the motorisation of tribal raids and to enable the pursuit of highway robbers.[41]

[37] CADN, 1SL/1/V/588, 'Compte rendu détaillé des travaux de la conférence d'El Qaim', prepared by the French delegates to the conference, 23 May 1923.
[38] Myriam Ababsa, 'La recomposition des allégeances tribales dans le Moyen-Orient syrien (1958-2007), *Etudes rurales* No. 184 (2009), p. 66; Idir Ouahes, 'Une "ceinture" d'espace étatique : le contrôle des Bédouins au début du Mandat Français en Syrie', *L'Espace Politique. Revue en ligne de géographie politique et de géopolitique* No. 27 (2015), pp. 4, 7–8; Martin Thomas, 'Bedouin Tribes and the Imperial Intelligence: Services in Syria, Iraq and Transjordan in the 1920s', *Journal of Contemporary History* 38:4 (2003), pp. 542–543.
[39] Daniel Neep, *Occupying Syria under the French Mandate*, pp. 168–169.
[40] Jean-David Mizrahi, *Genèse de l'Etat mandataire : Service des Renseignements et bandes armées en Syrie et au Liban dans les années 1920* (Paris : Publications de la Sorbonne, 2003); Daniel Neep, *Occupying Syria under the French Mandate*, pp. 179–186; Christian Velud, 'Une expérience d'administration régionale en Syrie durant le mandat français: conquête, colonisation et mise en valeur de la Ğazīra: 1920-1936' (PhD thesis: Université Lumière Lyon 2, 1991), pp. 243–262; Christian Velud, 'French Mandate Policy in the Syrian Steppe', in Martha Mundy and Basim Musallam (eds.), *The Transformation of Nomadic Society in the Arab East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 63–70.
[41] Mehdi Sakatni, 'From Camel to Truck? Automobiles and the Pastoralist Nomadism of Syrian Tribes during the French Mandate (1920–46)', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 39:1 (2019), pp. 164–165.

Despite their stated desire to avoid dependence on the shaykhs, however, the French did not abandon the co-optation policy relating to tribal shaykhs.[42] In late 1923, for example, they relied on a certain Trad Melhem to keep an eye on the various nomadic tribes living along the Baghdad–Damascus route at the time.[43] They also continued to grant subsidies throughout the 1920s, distributing them to a larger number of shaykhs, who together could have extensive influence on the nomadic groups as a whole.[44] In reality, the attitude of the French translated into a variety of policies on the ground, just like those of the British. At Al-Qa'im, the French position was not fixed definitively. Charles Terrier admitted that if the British persisted in proposing that Ibn Hadhdhal would be in charge of securing the Baghdad–Damascus route in Iraqi territory, the French would choose their own shaykh to secure the Syrian portion of the route. The delegates left the conference without reaching an agreement on the Damascus–Baghdad route, having decided that for the time being, the respective authorities would secure their respective stretches independently.

Muhammad al-Bassam

High-ranking officials were not the only ones to seek collaborations with individuals who had influence on the Bedouin tribes. The Nairn brothers and the local French and British administrators thought of another way to ensure the safety of the convoys. Earlier, Major McCallum had recommended that travellers employ a Bedouin guide not only to show them the way through the desert but also to act as 'a safeguard against hostile action from members of his tribe'. To this end, they could apply directly to the Damascus-based merchant Muhammad al-Bassam or his agent in Baghdad.[45] Muhammad al-Bassam was considered indispensable for the smooth running of the convoys between Damascus and Baghdad not only because the first expeditions could not have been carried out without him, as the previous chapter has shown, but also because he enjoyed a certain influence among the nomadic groups. British Consul Palmer was also convinced by this safeguard: 'Neither Nuri Shalan nor Ibn Haddhal will create any trouble—both are friends of Bassam', he pointed out.[46] So too were the Nairn brothers.

[42] Anthony B. Toth reminds us that with regard to the French and British policies towards nomadic tribes 'practice rarely coincid[ed] with rhetoric'. See Anthony B. Toth, 'The Transformation of a Pastoral Economy', p. 158.
[43] SHD/GR 4 H 72/2, Report by *Service des Renseignements*, French delegation at Damascus, 28 December 1923.
[44] Laura Stocker, 'The "Camel Dispute"', pp. 331–332.
[45] TNA, FO 371/9013, 'Report on Reconnaissance by Motor Car from Beyrout via Damascus to Bagdad', drawn up by Major McCallum (British liaison officer), Beirut, 1 May 1923.
[46] TNA, FO 371/9013, 'New Trans-desert Postal Service', a letter from Palmer (British consul, Damascus) to the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 16 April 1923.

On 6 May 1923, Muhammad al-Bassam and Norman Nairn signed an agreement which fixed the general provisions for cooperation between the Damascene merchant and the Nairn Transport Company. Accordingly, Norman Nairn gave al-Bassam one third of the revenue from his postal contract with the Iraqi government and a fixed monthly subsidy equivalent to a total of £2,000 a year. In return, al-Bassam pledged to use his influence with the nomadic tribes to dissuade them from attacking the cars and to provide guides for each convoy.[47] In the absence of effective action taken by the Syrian and Iraqi governments, the Nairn Transport Company had no choice at the time but to rely on Muhammad al-Bassam to protect its convoys. Furthermore, British Consul Palmer opined that dispensing with him after all the contributions he had made to the development of motorised transport between Baghdad and Damascus was not advisable:

> […] it would now be impossible to drop Haji Bassam from any future arrangements. This I have long realized, as Bassam would feel injured and—owing to his great hold upon the Bedouins—might contrive to make this route unpleasant for travellers. In any case it would be a rank of injustice towards Bassam; and might even convert him from pro-British to anti-British sentiments.[48]

Yet, despite this mutual dependence, relations between Norman Nairn and Muhammad al-Bassam were strained, as evidenced by an incident that occurred in early 1924. As the secretariat of the High Commissioner for Iraq reported, a Ford car carrying two passengers arrived in Ramadi on 22 December 1923, travelling alone and not in a convoy. When the driver, who worked for al-Bassam, was asked to give details, he replied that he had left with the Nairn convoy but had been unable to keep up. On the other hand, the leader of the Nairn convoy, Gerald Nairn, stated that al-Bassam had not made any arrangements with them to have his car included in the convoy. The British High Commissioner considered the incident as a clear violation of the traffic regulations drawn up by French and British police officers in November 1923 and asked the French to take necessary measures against al-Bassam.[49] However, the regulations on transdesert traffic had not yet been implemented in the form of a decree, so no action could be taken against al-Bassam, as British Consul Palmer pointed out. He also felt that

[47] TNA, FO 684/1/23/1, Agreement Signed between Norman Nairn and Hajj Bassam, 6 May 1923. See also Christina Phelps Grant, *The Syrian Desert*, pp. 274–275; Philippe Pétriat, 'The Uneven Age of Speed: Caravans, Technology, and Mobility in the Late Ottoman and Post-Ottoman Middle East', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 53:2 (May 2021), p. 274.
[48] TNA, FO 371/9013, British Consul Palmer to the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Damascus, 14 June 1923.
[49] TNA, FO 684/1/23/1, secretariat of the High Commissioner for Iraq to Palmer (British consul, Damascus), Baghdad, 19 January 1924.

the charges against Muhammad al-Bassam were exaggerated. In a letter to the French High Commissioner, he recalled that al-Bassam had been reluctantly admitted by the Nairn brothers into their company and, therefore, the accusations against him were not to be given too much weight.[50] He pointed out to the Civil Secretary in Baghdad that al-Bassam had done 'all the original pioneer work on the Bagdad Route under [his] direction' and questioned the intentions of the Nairn brothers.

> The Nairn Bros. are not in my opinion excellent examples of commercial probity; and I strongly suspect them of having the intention of trying to get rid of Bassam, now that they know that there are French Armoured Cars placed upon the Route. I can only, therefore, consider that this incident was a first deliberate attempt to eliminate Bassam, and, I have, therefore, not seen my way to do more than carry out the letter of your instructions.[51]

Finally, Consul Palmer wrote to al-Bassam to keep him informed of the ongoing discussions and to advise him not to make the same mistake again, signing off as 'your old friend'.[52] Shortly afterwards, the High Commissioner for Iraq reported on a breach by al-Bassam. The newly appointed British consul in Damascus, W. A. Smart, replied that he had taken the decision to go and talk to al-Bassam himself rather than report the facts to the French authorities. He argued that he did not want to start his tenure in Damascus with 'a rather unfriendly act to Sheikh Ibn Bassam', whose close relations with the British were well-known.[53]

This episode offers further evidence of al-Bassam's influential position in the early 1920s. His close relationship with Consul Palmer demonstrates that he was able to navigate the post-war political reconfiguration astutely. Furthermore, his association with the Nairn Transport Company was a matter of necessity for the Nairn brothers. It was crucial for them to co-opt an influential person among the nomadic tribes; breaking away from him could have led to harmful reprisals for their business. They felt that this collaboration was necessary until governments could guarantee security in the Syrian-Iraqi border areas. The use of tribal guides did not, in fact, last long. Six months into its service, the Nairn Transport Company abandoned this practice and relied solely on the experience of its drivers to drive each convoy safely across the desert. They maintained their cooperation with al-Bassam until 1926, when they stopped

[50] TNA, FO 684/1/23/1, British Consul Palmer to the French High Commission's delegate in Damascus, Damascus, 28 January 1924.
[51] TNA, FO 684/1/23/1, British Consul Palmer to the Civil Secretary (Government House, Baghdad), Damascus, 28 January 1924.
[52] TNA, FO 684/1/23/1, British Consul Palmer to Muhammad al-Bassam, Damascus, 28 January 1924.
[53] TNA, FO 684/1/23/1, secretariat of the High Commissioner for Iraq to Smart (British consul, Damascus), Baghdad, 2 February 1924, and his reply, Damascus, 16 February 1924.

giving him one-third of the revenue from the postal contract and the monthly subsidy. Muhammad al-Bassam nevertheless acquired some shares in the company.[54]

Franco–British Patrols Meet on the Border

Danger is growing

Between late 1923 and mid-1925, several attacks on convoys travelling between Syria and Iraq shook the confidence of even the most optimistic individuals about the security of the Baghdad–Damascus route. On 21 December 1923, two convoys of the Nairn Transport Company set off across the Syrian Desert, the first leaving Damascus and the second Ramadi. The eastbound convoy travelled safely to the vicinity of Jebel Tenf, which provided high ground in the middle of the desert. Then, as reported by the British liaison officer to the French Levant Army, the cars were 'fired upon by a group of horsemen who galloped out from a Bedouin encampment some 30 miles West of Jebel Tenf (i.e. in French territory) […]'. Fortunately, none of the cars were hit and the drivers continued at full speed until they reached the convoy coming from Baghdad. The westbound convoy stopped and waited for nightfall before setting off towards Syria shortly after midnight. At about 3 a.m., however, the first car came under fire at about the same place as the first convoy. The drivers turned off their headlights and accelerated, once again escaping from a dangerous situation without sustaining further damage.[55]

As soon as the French were warned by the British, Captain Terrier went to the scene of the incident to conduct an investigation, concluding that the perpetrators were from a group of the Fawara tribe. On 25 December, a detachment of the Palmyra *Méhariste* company was despatched to find and capture the suspects. The French inflicted severe punishments both on the perpetrators and on their tribe and its shaykh, who was held to be equally responsible. They arrested 15 members of the tribe, seized 10 guns, 45 camels and a mare, and fined the sheikh who had allegedly confessed to the attack.[56] Collective punishment applied to nomadic groups was a common practice among the Mandate powers.[57] The prompt capture of the culprits was intended to demonstrate the strength of the French police and their capacity to prevent criminal

[54] Philippe Pétriat, 'The Uneven Age of Speed', p. 286; TNA, FO 371/10831, Nairn Transport Company to the High Commissioner for Iraq, Beirut, 28 October 1925.
[55] TNA, AIR 5/408, Major McCallum (British liaison officer) to Air Staff Intelligence, Beirut, 24 December 1923.
[56] TNA, AIR 5/408, Major McCallum to Air Staff Intelligence, Beirut, 17 January 1924; SHD/GR 4 H 72/2, Report by Intelligence Service, French delegation at Damascus, 28 December 1923; SHD/GR 4 H 64/1, 'Bulletin de Renseignements No. 568', 2–21 January 1924.
[57] Priya Satia, '"A Rebellion of Technology": Development, Policing and the British Arabian Imaginary' in Diana K. Davis and Edmund Burke III (eds.), *Environmental Imaginaries of the Middle East and North Africa* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2011), pp. 23–60; Laura Stocker, 'The "Camel Dispute"', p. 330.

actions on transdesert convoys from going unpunished. The Beirut newspaper *Lisan al-Hal* reported the success of the French punitive expedition, noting that it had been made possible by the joint action of the intelligence service and the camel corps. According to the newspaper, the expedition provided further proof that the desert was under control.[58]

The case was not, however, closed so quickly. British Consul Palmer expressed doubts about the culpability of the Fawara and made his own enquiry. In a letter to the Foreign Office, he reported a different conclusion. He noted that by passing close to the Fawara camel herd, the Nairn cars had frightened the animals, dispersing them in all directions, when the drivers could easily have gone around them. As a result, the tribesmen had fired into the air to scare the drivers but with no intention of attacking the convoy. Palmer pointed out that he had advised the Nairn drivers to avoid crowds of camels and to pay attention to their seasonal migrations. He concluded that the incident was due to drivers' 'lack of consideration for others' which made the pastoralist nomads' reaction understandable: 'After all, the desert belongs to the Bedouins, and it must be annoying for them to lose their scanty property and have to chase their camels several miles.'[59]

For his part, the British consul in Beirut, H.E. Satow, supported the thesis of a deliberate attack. According to his own investigation, two of the three drivers claimed that the first convoy passed only sheep but no camels shortly before arriving at the place where the incident occurred. They confirmed, however, that the Bedouin had fired into the air. As for the second convoy, it slowed down upon its arrival near the Bedouin camp, according to the report of the convoy leader. For Consul Satow, the two incidents were linked, and the story of the frightened camels had been invented afterwards as an excuse to cover up the nomads' intention to attack and hold up the cars. He concluded that in any case, the incident was closed because 'the French Authorities [had] taken prompt and severe action in regard to the offenders'.[60] The British liaison officer in Beirut, Major McCallum, agreed with Consul Satow. In his opinion, the Bedouin had fired into the air because they did not want to kill anyone; they simply wanted to frighten the drivers and force them to stop.[61]

As these attacks caused more fear than harm, no arrangements were made to secure the traffic, even though the British liaison officer in Beirut requested the introduction of military escorts. During 1924, few incidents occurred on the Baghdad–Damascus route. The following

[58] AUB, 'Fī ṭarīq Baghdād', *Lisan al-Hal*, 3 January 1924, p. 2; AUB, 'Al-qabḍ 'alā-l-ladhīna hājamū' sayyārāt sharikāt Nairn', *Lisan al-Hal*, 10 January 1924, p. 2.
[59] TNA, FO 371/10092, British Consul Palmer to the Foreign Office, Damascus, 7 January 1924.
[60] TNA, FO 684/1/24/14, British Consul Satow to the Foreign Office, Beirut, 15 January 1924.
[61] TNA, AIR 5/408, Major McCallum (British liaison officer) to Air Staff Intelligence, Beirut, 17 January 1924.

year, however, an attack with far more serious consequences served as a wake-up call. On the night of 5–6 March 1925, a convoy of the Eastern Transport Company carrying the French consul in Baghdad, Mr. Maillard, and his wife and child from Baghdad to Damascus was attacked by highway robbers 20 km west of Wadi Hauran. The attackers shot at the vehicles to stop them, killing Mrs Maillard, and robbed the passengers. One of the two cars drove on to Palmyra to inform the French authorities and bring back assistance. The French sent an aircraft to search for the robbers and informed the British authorities in Baghdad of the incident, demanding that they take swift and strong action on their side. The Royal Air Force first attempted to send out an aircraft, but because of a sandstorm, a group of armoured cars and a detachment of the camel corps were despatched instead to pursue the attackers.[62]

The attack caused considerable friction between the French and British administrations. As reported by the new British liaison officer in Beirut, Major Salisbury Jones, it created a strong sense of 'discontent' on the French side because it resulted in the death of a French national and took place on Iraqi territory. A third reason was that the Eastern Transport Company was supported by the French High Commission. The French claimed that full security had been implemented on their side and complained of serious shortcomings in Iraqi territory. Major Salisbury Jones acknowledged that they had 'a very well-organised system' to secure the transdesert route, relying on cooperation between the *Méhariste* companies, the Air Force and Ford armoured cars.[63] The atmosphere was more tense in Damascus than in Beirut. French officials in Beirut reacted with distance and restraint, giving little credence to an article published in the Francophile newspaper, *La Syrie*, blaming the British for the security lapse.[64] However, some members of the French delegation in Damascus were adamant that the attack had been orchestrated by the British to divert travellers from the Palmyra route to the southern route. Many other rumours and doubts about the hold-up of the Eastern Transport Company convoy added to the strained atmosphere.[65] Latent imperial rivalry resurfaced in the form of

[62] SHD/GR 4H 65/2, 'Bulletin de renseignements No. 594' 1–7 March 1925 ; CADC, 48CPCOM1, Bagot (Eastern Transport Company) to the French consulate, Baghdad, 8 March 1925; Telegraph from High Commissioner Sarrail, 9 March 1925; High Commissioner Dobbs to French Consul Maigret, Baghdad, 9 March 1925; TNA, AIR 5/408 a telegram from RAF headquarters to the Air Ministry, Baghdad, 13 March 1925; Telegram from the High Commissioner for Iraq to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Baghdad, 13 March 1925; LON, R59/1/17502/51544, Report by his Britannic Majesty's Government to the League of Nations on the Administration of Iraq for the year 1925, p. 43.

[63] TNA, AIR 5/408, Major Salisbury Jones (British liaison officer) to Air Staff Intelligence, Beirut, 11 March 1925.

[64] Idir Ouahes points out that the editor of *La Syrie*, Georges Vayssié, sometimes expressed such massive support for the French that it could irritate French officials themselves. See Idir Ouahes, *Syria and Lebanon under the French Mandate: Cultural Imperialism and the Workings of Empire* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018), p. 164.

[65] TNA, AIR 5/408, British Consul Satow to the High Commissioner for Iraq, Beirut, 7 May 1925; British Consul Smart to the High Commissioner for Iraq, Damascus, 8 May 1925; British Consul Smart to the Foreign Office, Damascus, 23 May 1925.

accusations of 'Anglophobia' and 'Francophobia', serving as a reminder that the Franco–British relationship that was strengthened around the common goal of securing the transdesert routes remained a form of 'competitive collaboration' that characterised relations between imperial powers across numerous settings.[66]

At the same time, the incident prompted discussions on strengthening collaborative measures to secure the transdesert route. The French called for much stronger action to prevent attacks on convoys but were met with refusal and reluctance on the part of some British officials. The Air Council governing the Royal Air Force considered the route to be relatively safe at that time and argued that 'complete security' could never be assured, as 'small bands of brigands [would] always be able to interfere practically when and where they chose'.[67] The Colonial Office agreed that the British were responsible for maintaining 'public order and security' in the Iraqi borderlands but concluded that this particular incident was not sufficient to require a change in existing arrangements in Iraq. In short, British civilian and military authorities in London insisted that this was an 'isolated attack' and that the best way to secure the route would be to take immediate steps to apprehend and punish the culprits.[68] In Beirut, however, Major Salisbury Jones was of a different opinion and decided to meet Captain Terrier on 1 April 1925 to discuss further possibilities of cooperation between the Syrian and Iraqi military. In order to strengthen state control in the Syrian–Iraqi borderlands, they proposed establishing a 'periodic liaison' between motorised units and camel corps of Syrian and Iraqi forces that would meet at a selected location in the middle of the desert, as shall be discussed in the next section.[69] The Air Ministry strongly criticised the liaison officer for taking this initiative and asked him not to pursue cooperation with the French any further.[70] By contrast, the British authorities in Iraq welcomed the proposal, which they believed would be of great benefit for the 'Nairn route'.[71]

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[66] Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo and Damiano Matasci, 'Imperialism, Internationalism and Globalisation in Twentieth Century Africa', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 48:5 (2020), 794; James R. Fichter, 'Britain and France, Connected Empires', in James R. Fichter (ed.), *British and French Colonialism in Africa, Asia and the Middle East*, p. 1.

[67] TNA, AIR 5/408, Webster (Air Council) to the Colonial Office, London, 21 March 1925.

[68] TNA, AIR 5/408, Young (Colonial Office) to the Air Ministry, London, 24 March 1925; Young (Colonial Office) to the Foreign Office, London, 31 March 1924; Oliphant (Foreign Office) to A. de Fleuriau, London, 7 April 1925.

[69] TNA, AIR 5/408, 'General Arrangements Made by the French Military Authorities', a report drawn up by Major Salisbury Jones, 1 April 1925; SHD/GR 4 H 152/5, Note drawn up by General Sarrail, Beirut, 13 May 1925 [Online]. https://www.memoiredeshommes.sga.defense.gouv.fr/fr/ark:/40699/e0056094b1f7a0ff/56094b1fdbff4 (accessed 29 April 2022).

[70] TNA, AIR 5/408, Air Ministry to Major Salisbury Jones (British liaison officer, Beirut), London, 30 April 1925.

[71] TNA, AIR 5/408, Air Vice Marshal Higgins, Baghdad to the Air Ministry, London, 27 April 1925.

Questions of territorial sovereignty

The establishment of the so-called 'monthly desert liaison' raised the question of where the Iraqi and Syrian escorts would meet. Given the absence of a clearly delineated border and the two powers' claim to territorial sovereignty, choosing a location was not an easy task. However, there were precedents. When, in 1922, the French and British police set up a similar system of escorts for caravans and cars between Deir ez-Zor and Mosul, the location of the meeting point was a point discussion. At that time, the British proposed the Khabur River; a suggestion which was opposed by the French High Commissioner, who pointed out that the provisional Syrian–Iraqi border passed 75 km to the east. He argued that allowing Iraqi escorts to enter Syrian territory over a stretch of several dozen kilometres would set a bad example to the nomadic groups. In response, the British High Commissioner assured him that these escorts would only be a 'temporary arrangement' and would in no way 'prejudice delimitation of [the] frontier by the boundary commission'.[72] The delegates eventually agreed that the escorts would meet at Al-Bidea, a spot located in Iraq territory. But as the route crossed the Syrian–Iraqi border in a barren area with no water, they preferred a more populated location that was already known to people travelling between Mosul and Deir ez-Zor. In the aforementioned Coux–Flaxman agreement, the French and British pledged not to base any future territorial claims on this arrangement.[73]

At the Al-Qa'im Conference held in May 1923, some delegates proposed the establishment of escorts on the Baghdad–Damascus route as well, but this time, the choice of the meeting venue proved a stumbling block for the proposal. As Captain Terrier on the French side reported, considerable ambiguity regarding the delineation of the border made it impossible to choose a mutually agreed meeting place for the escorts:

> Mais ici se pose la question de savoir jusqu'où pourront pousser les escortes de l'une et de l'autre zone, c'est-à-dire en quel point est censé commencer la zone Irakienne et cesser la zone Syrienne et inversement. L'ignorance absolue où l'on est à propos d'un tel point oblige à réserver la solution.[74]

[72] TNA, FO 371/7851, Percy Cox (High Commissioner for Iraq) to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, 17 May 1922 and a letter from Bourdillon (secretary to the High Commissioner for Iraq), 12 June 1922.
[73] Carl Bryant Shook, 'The Origins and Development of Iraq's National Boundaries, 1918–1932: Policing and Political Geography in the Iraq-Nejd and Iraq-Syria Borderlands' (PhD thesis, University of Chicago, 2018), p. 245. See also TNA, FO 371/7851, Coux-Flaxman Agreement (in French), 31 July 1922.
[74] CADN, 1SL/1/V/588, 'Compte rendu détaillé des travaux de la conférence d'El Qaim', prepared by the French delegates to the conference, 23 May 1923, p. 13. Translation: 'But here the question arises as to how far the escorts from either side can go, that is, at what point the Iraqi zone is supposed to start and the Syrian zone to end and vice versa. The absolute ignorance of such a point forces us to hold back from a solution.'

On the last day of the conference, the British claimed that they could not locate this point precisely and gave an approximate location, which seemed too far west to the French. In the end, the delegates dropped the plan to establish escorts for the time being.[75]

However, two years later, following the attack that caused Mrs Maillard's death, the need for escorts became much more pressing, prompting the French and British authorities to resume discussions with greater determination. In their draft proposal, Captain Terrier and Major Salisbury Jones suggested that the Syrian and Iraqi patrols on the Baghdad–Damascus route meet at Bir Mulusa, a place known for its many wells. It was ideally located, being equidistant from Palmyra, Deir ez-Zor and Hit, from where separate detachments of the Syrian and Iraqi forces would leave.[76] The British High Commissioner for Iraq pointed out that Bir Mulusa was located in Iraqi territory, some 90 km from the borderline described in the 1920 Franco–British Convention, but he did not oppose the project. 'I have no objection to French armoured cars crossing the boundary as far as this place for the purpose stated above provided that the final delimitation of the Syro–Iraq boundary is in no way prejudiced thereby […].'[77] Thereupon, the French promised that they would never use Henry Dobbs' consent to argue for a change in the demarcation line and the first liaison could take place. Commencing from 28 May 1925, Syrian and Iraqi police detachments began to meet at Bir Mulussa every last Thursday of the month.[78]

Between 1922 and 1925, the need to secure the Syrian–Iraqi borderlands went hand in hand with the imperative of both states to assert claims to territorial sovereignty. As Carl Bryant Shook has rightly pointed out, the 'boundary was therefore implicated directly and indirectly in every discussion about security'.[79] However, as the need for cross-border collaboration became more pressing, the Mandate authorities agreed to relinquish the rigid assertion of their territorial sovereignty and allow foreign patrols to cross the provisional border. In some cases, the territorial claims of the two Mandate states could lead to more intense conflicts, especially when it came to the construction of buildings in the borderlands. As Carl Shook has shown, Al-Bidea was the subject of a Franco–British dispute that lasted several years, as it became more than just a meeting point for escorts. In 1923, rumours suggesting that the French wanted to build a post there generated considerable friction. Moreover, in 1927, the French complained

[75] Ibid., p. 21.
[76] TNA, AIR 5/408, the Air Ministry to Major Salisbury Jones (British liaison officer, Beirut), London, 30 April 1925.
[77] AIR 5/408, High Commissioner Dobbs (Iraq) to High Commissioner Sarrail (Syria/Lebanon), Baghdad, 30 April 1925.
[78] SHD/GR 4 H 152/5, Chief of Staff (French Levant Army) to Air Staff Headquarters, Beirut, 12 May 1925.
[79] Carl Bryant Shook, 'The Origins and Development of Iraq's National Boundaries, 1918–1932', p. 253.

that the British were considering establishing a permanent post at Al-Bidea, even though there was no definitive agreement on the location of this site.[80]

The liaison at Bir Mulusa

Commandant Dentz, the head of the French intelligence service, participated in the first liaison. In a detailed report, he underlined the success of the joint operation but also the difficulties encountered on the French side due to the poor condition of the vehicles. Two armoured cars from the *Méharist*e company and two touring cars left Palmyra on 27 May 1925, more or less following the Kettaneh route until they joined the Iraqi armoured cars on 28 May at the entrance to the Garaa plain, before continuing together to Bir Mulusa. Commander Dentz deemed the location suitable for subsequent monthly meetings. The Garaa plain around Bir Mulusa was a wintering place that attracted Syrian tribes to stay for several months a year. After a night spent in the company of the Iraqi military, the Syrian convoy left the next day for Palmyra.[81] The Syrian and Iraqi detachments repeated the operation the following month and despite some incidents on both sides, met again near Bir Mulusa on 26 June 1925.[82]

The Bir Mulusa 'monthly liaison' created the conditions for French/Syrian and British/Iraqi forces to meet on the ground and exchange information in a very different context from that of the cross-border conferences between state officials. At the first meeting held on 28 May 1925, the French officers compared the conditions of the Syrian *Méhariste* troops with those of the British Iraqi forces. For Commandant Dentz, the experience came as a terrible shock. As he reported, the two Tracford armoured cars of the Palmyra detachment were in terrible condition and reached the meeting point with much difficulty. During the journey, they broke down numerous times, sometimes severely, had several flat tyres and were unable to move forward once the extensive but necessary water supplies were loaded. In the end, the staff returned to Palmyra exhausted because of the many repairs they had been compelled to make along the way. Conversely, the British—still according to the report of Commandant Dentz—arrived at the meeting point travelling in vehicles in good condition, which were equipped with a transportable wireless telegraphy set that was sorely lacking in the French vehicles. Commandant Dentz also commented on the image and reputation of the French army. Compared to the British soldiers 'in immaculate uniforms' in their nice and tidy Rolls Royce

[80] Ibid., pp. 247, 252.
[81] SHD/GR 4 H 152/5, 'Rapport du Commandant Dentz sur la liaison Franco-Britannique de Bir-el-Melossa', Beirut, 15 June 1925.
[82] SHD/GR 4 H 152/5, 'Rapport du Lieutenant Robitaille, Commandant la Section A.M.L. sur la liaison effectuée le 26 juin 1925 à Bir Melossa avec les autos-mitrailleuses britanniques', 27 June 1925.

cars, the French patrol had a 'poor military appearance' ('*une piètre allure militaire*'), as they travelled in their overloaded cars.[83] Commandant Denz found that the outfits of the French soldiers and officers from the Palmyra detachment were inappropriate, as they wore sandals and did not wear helmets, like camel drivers. He noted that this attire came as a great surprise to the British.[84]

On the French side, the meeting of the two patrols generated a deep desire to reorganise the regiment. Shortly after the first liaison, a memo issued by General Michaud of the French Levant Army made it compulsory for the French officers of the *Méhariste* company to wear a 'colonial helmet' to distinguish them from the Syrian auxiliaries and to protect them from the sun. Moreover, the instructions issued for the second 'liaison' mission specified that soldiers and officers should wear shoes.[85] Commandant Dentz also requested the development of wireless communication between the various Syrian units in charge of securing the desert borderlands, namely the air force, the camel corps and the motorised troops. He recommended the acquisition of portable radiotelegraphy systems that would allow for better coordination of patrol actions. Furthermore, he took steps to maintain the armoured cars in better condition and to supply new vehicles to Palmyra. During the second 'liaison' at the end of June, the two Tracford cars continued to cause problems, but the introduction of a modified 'Chenard' car achieved more satisfactory results.[86] According to Lieutenant Robitaille's report about this second meeting, the French equipment impressed the British, who remarked that the French 'Chenard' seemed much better suited to the desert patrol mission, their own cars being less manoeuvrable, heavier and consuming a lot of petrol.[87] The 'monthly desert liaison' established in mid-1923 not only strengthened cooperation but it also prompted a transfer of knowledge and fostered new practices.

In the two years that followed the establishment of a regular transdesert transport service in October 1923, several attacks on convoys called into question the initial confidence in the security of the Syrian–Iraqi borderlands and the ability of local intermediaries to prevent such

[83] SHD/GR 4 H 152/5, 'Rapport du Commandant Dentz sur la liaison Franco-Britannique de Bir-el-Melossa', Beirut, 15 June 1925. Translation: 'In any case, at the last link-up, next to the British machine-gun cars, magnificent Rolls Royce cars in which everything had its place, and British soldiers in impeccable uniforms, albeit in their shirt sleeves, the section of French machine-gun cars, overloaded with crates and cans, had a poor military appearance.'
[84] Ibid.
[85] SHD/GR 4 H 152/5, 'Note de service' by General Michaud, 3 June 1925; 'Ordre de mission', Palmyra, 22 June 1925.
[86] SHD/GR 4 H 152/5, 'Extrait d'un rapport du Chef de Service des Renseignements de Beyrouth', 23 June 1925; letter from Captain Descarpentries, 18 July 1925; 'Compte-rendu', Armée Française du Levant, 2 July 1926.
[87] SHD/GR 4 H 152/5, 'Rapport du Lieutenant Robitaille, Commandant la Section A.M.L. sur la liaison effectuée le 26 juin 1925 à Bir Melossa avec les autos-mitrailleuses britanniques', 27 June 1925.

attacks. While each incident gave rise to rumours and different interpretations that speak volumes about the prevailing state of uncertainty, it became increasingly evident that the growth of transdesert traffic was arousing the covetous inclinations of potential robbers, especially among the nomadic tribes, who could no longer levy taxes on travellers in transit. Attacks on convoys threatened the further development of transdesert traffic and added fuel to the fire that had been sparked in Franco–British relations, raising questions of responsibility and sovereignty. While both powers recognized the status quo concerning the border line, they were well aware that each side was inclined to extend the border a little further. The attacks, however, eventually led to a strengthening of cross-border cooperation. Following the meetings and conferences between police officers and state officials, the establishment of the monthly liaison strengthened relations between the military forces of the Lebanese, Syrian and Iraqi Mandate states.

The Great Syrian Revolt

Despite the jointly organised monthly liaison between Syrian and Iraqi forces, the desert tracks remained largely unguarded in the 1920s, and numerous attacks on convoys took place between April and June 1925.[88] However, it was the outbreak of the Great Syrian Revolt that caused a surge of robberies on the transdesert routes and landed the French side in a quagmire. In the summer of 1925, unrest, which broke out in southern Syria, rapidly evolved into a widespread insurrection against the French throughout the country. What began as a local uprising in the southern region of Jebel Druze quickly spread to Damascus and its surroundings. Between the summer of 1925 and the spring of 1926, and even extending up to 1927, various bands of insurgents controlled the countryside around Damascus and carried out repeated offensives against the French, cutting off transport and communications networks, especially the railways.[89]

However, railroads were not the only infrastructure targeted during this period. During August and September 1925, there was also a sharp increase in highway robberies on Syrian roads and desert tracks near Damascus. These robberies generated a great deal of correspondence between French and British officials, who exchanged letters of complaint

[88] CADC, 48CPCOM42, 'Motorists held up', *The Baghdad Times*, 24 April 1925; SHD/GR 4H 65/2, 'Bulletin de Renseignements No.608', week of June 13 to 20, 1925; AIR 23/292, S.S.O. Ramadi, Weekly Report no. AI/10/47, 26 June 1925.

[89] Michael Provence, 'Identifying Rebels: Insurgents in the Countryside of Damascus , 1925-1926', in Thomas Philipp and Christoph Schumann (eds.), *From the Syrian Land to the States of Syria and Lebanon* (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2004), pp. 291–306.

requesting compensation and providing statements and testimonies of victims as well as reports and summaries of the incidents. Numerous telegrams were despatched, notifying authorities of attacks and seeking to coordinate follow-up operations. One example is this tragic message telegraphed by the British consul in Damascus to the High Commissioner for Iraq:

> Two large motor busses which left Baghdad twentyfifth [25th August 1925] full [of] poorer class natives largely Iraqi Jews attacked plundered yesterday afternoon scene attack Nairn by same people. One killed few slightly wounded.[90]

On the same day, a British army officer on his way from Deir ez-Zor to Damascus was attacked near Nasiriyah by a group of armed men who robbed him, his driver and a traveller he had picked up on the way, leaving him only 'with a torn vest and a pair of stockings.'[91] Many other incidents took place in Syrian territory in the following days, as reported by the U.S. vice consul in Damascus. On 26 August, a British traveller returning from Baghdad was robbed on the Palmyra route and left 'entirely naked'. On August 27, two cars coming from Baghdad along the direct route were attacked near Dumayr by people who took the goods they were carrying, carpets and wool. On August 28, the passengers of two other cars coming from Iraq were robbed once again in Dumayr.[92] Another particularly impressive attack, with far-reaching consequences, caused the greatest stir. On 26 August 1925, a special convoy of the Nairn Transport Company left Baghdad for Damascus carrying a shipment of Turkish gold pounds on behalf of the Imperial Bank of Persia for the *Banque Française de Syrie*. The convoy was attacked about 50 km east of Damascus by armed men who slightly injured a passenger and a driver and seriously wounded another driver, Stephen Bentley, who died of his injuries after being taken to hospital in Damascus. The thieves robbed the passengers and took the 15,000 gold pounds of the Imperial Bank of Persia. [93]

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[90] TNA, AIR 23/87, telegram from British Consul Smart to the High Commissioner for Iraq, Damascus, 29 August 1925.

[91] TNA, AIR 5/408, Fleming Mackenzie (British army officer) to British Consul Smart, no date; British Consul Smart to Gauthier (political assistant, French delegation in Damascus), Damascus, 29 August 1925. See also the French response to the request for compensation: TNA, AIR 5/408, Gauthier to Smart, 31 August 1925.

[92] NARA, Group 84, consular posts, Aleppo, vol. 116, U.S. Vice-Consul Keeley to the Secretary of State, Damascus, 29 August 1925.

[93] TNA, AIR 23/86, telegram from the High Commissioner for Iraq to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Baghdad, 28 August 1925; NARA, Group 84, consular posts, Aleppo, vol. 116, U.S. Vice-Consul Keeley to the Secretary of State, Damascus, 29 August 1925; TNA, FO 371/12307, E 5397, Brigandage Claims in Syria, No. 61, 15 December 1927. See also John Munro, *The Nairn Way*, p. 70; MECA, Nairn Transport Company Collection, press articles No. 38 and 39, 'Londoner Killed' and 'Attacked Gold Convoy'.

The military escorts and their bitter failure

The above incident prompted a series of new measures. On the British side, the High Commissioner for Iraq expressed surprise that such large sums of money were being transported without his knowledge and took steps to prohibit travellers from carrying lots of money, fearing that it would 'prove incitement to frontier attacks'.[94] A few days later, on 2 September 1925, the Iraqi Minister of Interior, Hikmat Sulayman, issued a new decree under the existing Motor Vehicles Law of 1924, which prohibited people from taking gold, silver and banknotes across the desert, except for what was deemed necessary for their immediate needs.[95] Furthermore, this deadly attack and all of the others committed in Syrian territory led the representatives of foreign powers to put pressure on the French to guarantee the safety of their nationals. The U.S. vice-consul in Damascus, for example, contacted French officials on a daily basis to obtain information on road safety and the measures taken in this regard. In his report, he described the French administration as being completely overwhelmed by events, desperately trying to restore law and order in the countryside around Damascus by employing a strategy of playing it by ear and providing contradictory, even false, information. According to him, the French were too busy trying to quell the growing insurgency in the southern regions that had been brewing since early August to deploy troops to secure the transdesert routes.[96] The attitude described by the U.S. consular officials reflected a more general position of the French during the Syrian Revolt of 1925–1927, who frequently downplayed the situation in their reports.[97]

However, the French could not remain inactive whilst the situation assumed huge proportions. Commencing from 20 August 1925, they inaugurated a system of military escorts for transdesert convoys, transforming the old 'monthly liaison' patrols into armed escorts. During the first expedition led by Lieutenant Robitaille, two armoured cars accompanied the Nairn convoy from Damascus to the Iraqi border, where they met the westbound Baghdad convoy and escorted it back to Damascus. En route, the French soldiers encountered a group of armed men, shot at them and managed to drive them away.[98] The establishment of these escorts

[94] TNA, AIR 23/86, telegram from the High Commissioner for Iraq to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Baghdad, 8 August 1925.
[95] TNA, AIR 23/390, notification published in the *Baghdad Times* of 3 September 1925.
[96] NARA, Record Group 84, consular post, Aleppo, vol. 116, U.S. Vice-Consul Keeley to the Secretary of State, Damascus, 29 August 1925; see also Maurice W. Altaffer (U.S. vice-consul) to the Secretary of State, Aleppo, 21 October 1925; NARA Record Group 84, consular post, Beirut, vol. 465, U.S. Consul Knabenshue to the Secretary of State, Beirut, 14 October 1925. NARA Record Group 84, consular post, Aleppo, vol 116, U.S. Vice-Consul Altaffer) to the Secretary of State, Aleppo, 21 October 1925.
[97] Daniel Neep, *Occupying Syria under the French Mandate*, p. 179; Michael Provence, 'Identifying Rebels', p. 293.
[98] SHD/GR 4 H 152/5, Report by Lieutenant Robitaille (1st *Méhariste* company) on the missions carried out between 18 August and 1 September 1925, 3 September 1925; TNA, AIR 5/408, Aubouard (French delegate of

followed the announcement by the British that in the absence of security in the vicinity of Damascus, the Nairn mail convoy would be diverted to the south. The High Commissioner for Iraq, Henry Dobbs, remained very sceptical about the capacity of French armed escorts to prevent attacks and although he allowed a convoy of the Eastern Transport Company to travel via Palmyra, he stood by his decision to run Nairn convoys via Amman. On 3 September, the Nairn Transport Company sent its first exploratory convoy via the southern route.[99]

Faced with strong French recrimination, Henry Dobbs justified his decision to the Colonial Office, arguing that although he had no authority to regulate traffic outside of Iraq's borders, he had the right to require that official mail convoys leave Syria for Iraq only if their safety from robbery was assured.[100] As his letter also shows, his decision was motivated by the considerable uncertainty that surrounded the security of transdesert traffic, which was largely due to poor communication. He noted that telegrams from Damascus took at least 24 hours to reach Baghdad and 'frequently arrive[d] so badly mutilated that their deciphering [was] the work of many more hours'. It was therefore almost impossible to estimate the security situation within Syrian territory in real time. In addition, he received numerous telegrams daily with changing and often contradictory information from the British consul in Damascus. 'The confusion', he added, 'was increased by the fact that none of Consul Smart's telegrams bore any number, so that it was impossible to tell accurately in what sequence they had been despatched'. In these circumstances, Henry Dobbs continued, it had been impossible for him to respond to the many inquiries from companies, travellers and postal authorities about safety conditions. As he could not have issued notices 'varying from hour to hour', he had decided to stick to a definite plan of sending the Nairn convoys by the Amman route, while leaving the other contractors with the option to follow the usual routes.[101] Uncertainty was as meaningful as insecurity, and the shortcomings of the telegraph infrastructure and its misuse made communication very difficult. The problems raised by the British High Commissioner remind us that while the telegraph surpassed other means of communication in terms of its speed of transmission, it did not always allow for 'instant communications'.[102]

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the High Commissioner) to the British consul in Damascus, Damascus, 31 August 1925; telegram from British Consul Smart to the High Commissioner for Iraq, Damascus, 1 September 1925.

[99] TNA, AIR 5/408, telegram from the High Commissioner for Iraq to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Baghdad, 1 September 1925; TNA, AIR 23/87, Sturges (political secretary to the High Commissioner for Iraq) to the Ministry of Interior, Baghdad, 2 September 1925; TNA, AIR 5/408, telegram from the High Commissioner for Iraq to the Secretary of States for the Colonies, Baghdad, 6 September 1925.

[100] TNA, AIR 5/408, High Commissioner Dobbs to the Secretary of States for the Colonies, Baghdad, 10 September 1925.

[101] Ibid.

[102] Eugene Rogan, 'Instant Communications: The Impact of the Telegraph in Ottoman Syria', in Thomas Philipp and Birgit Schäbler (eds.), *The Syrian Land*, pp.113–128.

From 10 September 1925, the French organised two escorted convoys per week instead of one between Damascus and the Iraqi border in both directions. This measure was intended to allow more traffic to cross the desert. As this directly benefited the transport companies, the French asked them to provide cars for the escorts. In reality, the French did not have the equipment to organise the escorts themselves. On the Palmyra route, the Eastern Transport Company provided two cars equipped by the French with machine guns. On the direct route, the Nairn Transport Company provided a light truck, which was used along with the two French Chenard armoured cars.[103] Thus, although transdesert traffic was increasingly organised by the Mandate states, it remained highly dependent on private actors.

However, the new system of escorts to secure the transdesert routes proved woefully ineffective two days later. On 11 September, the Nairn convoy left Damascus with an escort of two armoured cars and two other cars carrying a detachment of the *Méhariste* company. About 135 km east of Damascus, the armoured cars leading the convoy encountered a dozen men with camels, supposedly in ambush, whom they identified as bandits. The French opened fire, forcing the group to split up and head in different directions. One of the armoured cars chased some of the fleeing men, while the other stayed with the convoy. A shootout took place between the French soldiers and the suspected bandits some 30 km away, during which two French officers—Captain Descarpentries and Lieutenant Robitaille—were wounded by a bullet that apparently passed right through both of them. The French detachment managed to capture three members of the group and then set off in the direction of Damascus carrying the wounded and the prisoners. On the way back, however, Captain Descarpentries died of his wound. A funeral was organised in Damascus and attended by foreign diplomats and some of the travellers present in the convoy that the French captain was escorting on 11 September. A subscription was pledged to finance the construction of a memorial in his honour in Damascus.[104]

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[103] NARA, Record Group 84, consular post, Aleppo, vol. 116, notice attached to a letter from Gauthier (political assistant) to the U.S. vice-consul in Damascus, Damascus, 10 September 1925; SHD/GR 4 H 152/5, High Commissioner's delegate to General Michaud, Damascus, 9 September 1925 and a letter written by General Michaud, Damascus, 10 September 1925; TNA, AIR 23/87, report by Major Jones Salisbury (British liaison officer), Beirut, 10 September 1925; TNA, FO 371/10831, British Consul Smart to British liaison officer, Damascus, 18 September 1925.

[104] SHD/GR 4 H 98/2, 'Compte-rendu journalier pour la journée du 12 septembre 1925, prepared by the French Levant Army, Damascus, 12 September 1925; TNA, AIR 5/408, telegram No. 12 from the British consul, Damascus, 12 September 1925; TNA, AIR 23/87, report by Major Jones Salisbury (British liaison officer), Beirut, 16 September 1925. On Gaston Descarpentries; see also Vincent Capdepuy, *Chroniques du bord du monde: Histoire d'un désert entre Syrie, Irak et Arabie* (Paris: Payot, 2021), pp. 24–26. Nile Green suggests that the Iranian traveller, 'Abdullah Bahrami, was part of the convoy escorted by Captain Descarpentries. See Nile Green, 'Fordist Connections: The Automotive Integration of the United States and Iran', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 58:2 (2016), p. 308.

Discontinuing traffic on the Baghdad–Damascus route

'Desert convoy again attacked', read a headline in *The Times* on 9 September 1925.[105] The incident marked a turning point in the organisation of transdesert traffic. If even an escorted convoy was not safe, then the direct route through the desert could no longer be an option. For the British consuls in Damascus and Beirut, only the return of law and order in the region of Damascus could make the resumption of transdesert traffic on this route possible. From this point on, the British ordered the Nairn Transport Company to use only the southern route via Amman and took steps to ensure their safety on the desert section between Rutbah Wells and Al-Azraq in Transjordan. Henceforth, the Nairn convoys took the following route: Baghdad–Amman–Jerusalem–Haifa–Beirut, which was much longer than the old 'Nairn route'. The company operated on this route between September 1925 and April 1926 despite major difficulties caused by the desert terrain in this region, as discussed in Chapter 1. Travel time was increased by about two days, and the company incurred many additional costs as a result of faster tire and vehicle wear.[106] The Foreign Office endorsed the decision of the High Commissioner for Iraq to divert the Nairn convoys to the south as long as the unrest in Syria continued but insisted that the decision would only be a temporary one. They objected to what they perceived as an attempt to establish an 'alternative route' to the Baghdad–Damascus route, as it would create 'unnecessary friction and misunderstandings' with the French.[107]

The direct route between Damascus and Baghdad was abandoned for just over a year, but the French continued to organise patrols and occasional escorts for cars travelling to Iraq through Palmyra, such as those of the Eastern Transport Company, other transport companies and private drivers. However, on 19 October 1925, the road between Damascus and Palmyra was closed to traffic and the cars of the Eastern Transport Company started taking a detour to avoid the troubled area around Damascus. Leaving Beirut, they drove north along the coast to Tripoli, then diverging from the seaside road to reach Homs before continuing to Palmyra from where they were accompanied by military escorts for the rest of the journey.[108] For a few weeks,

[105] MECA, Nairn Transport Company Collection, 'Desert convoy again attacked', *The Times*, 10 September 1925.
[106] CADC, 48CPCOM42, French Consul Maigret to the French Foreign Ministry, Baghdad, 28 October 1925; TNA, FO 371/10831, Acting British Consul Norman Mayers to the Foreign Office, Beirut, 19 October 1925. On the measures taken by the British to secure the desert stretch of the route between Rutbah and Azraq, see TNA, AIR 23/87, the High Commissioner for Iraq to the High Commissioner for Palestine, Baghdad, 21 September 1925; TNA, FO 371/10831, British Consul Smart to Chief British Representative in Amman, Damascus, 22 September 1925; TNA, AIR 5/408, the High Commissioner for Iraq to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Baghdad, 4 October 1925.
[107] TNA, AIR 5/408, Lancelot Oliphant (Foreign Office) to the Colonial Office, London, 21 October 1925.
[108] SHD/GR 4 H 152/5, 'Piste Nord-Palmyre', schedules of the escorted convoy, Damascus, 20 September 1925; NARA, Record Group 84, consular post, Beirut, vol. 465, U.S. Consul Knabenshue to the Secretary of State, Beirut, 14 October 1925; TNA, FO 371/10831, the Eastern Transport Company to the Foreign Office, Beirut, 27

security on the leg of the journey between Homs and Palmyra was not guaranteed, but the disruption of traffic was short-lived. The introduction of escorts on this stretch enabled the resumption of traffic.[109]

In March 1926, the Nairn Transport Company considered abandoning the Amman route because of its impracticality. After one of their cars got stuck in the mud for several days between Iraq and Transjordan, the company decided to experiment with the route followed by other cars.[110] From then on, Nairn cars plied via Tripoli, Homs and Palmyra. Between Palmyra and the Euphrates, however, their cars followed a new route. The so-called 'switch road' connected the northern track (or Palmyra route) to the southern track (or direct route), joining the latter shortly before reaching Rutbah.[111] From March 1926 onwards, all transport companies followed this route, which combined safety and speed, with only the cars of the Eastern Transport Company still allowed to continue towards the Euphrates via Kubeisa to avail of the hotel that the company had built there.[112] During the remainder of 1926, the Beirut–Tripoli–Homs–Palmyra–Rutbah–Baghdad route remained the most widely used transdesert route. The French undertook to improve some stretches between Beirut, Tripoli and Homs to facilitate convoy traffic.[113]

During the second half of 1926, the security situation in the countryside surrounding Damascus began to improve. French counterinsurgency operations in the spring and summer of 1926 were successful in pushing back rebel bands to more remote areas, notably in the Hawran region in southern Syria and later further back into Transjordan. Some of the leaders of the insurrection reached an agreement with the French and surrendered. Many other leaders who refused to compromise were forced to leave Syria and spend several years in exile, as they were sentenced to death in the French mandated territories.[114] The return to some semblance of

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October 1925. See also Maurice Pernot, 'L'inquiétude de l'Orient: deux expériences : l'Irak et la Syrie', *Revue des Deux Mondes* 38:3 (1927), pp. 530–559.

[109] SHD/GR 4 H 65/1, intelligence reports issued by *Service des Renseignements*, Beirut, 8 December 1925 as well as 25–27 December 1925; NARA, Record Group 84, consular post, Beirut, vol. 4, Political Memorandum No. 15, U.S. consulate, Beirut, 18 December 1925.

[110] TNA, FO 371/11466, British Consul Smart to the Foreign Office, Damascus, 12 March 1926; CADC, 48CPCOM43, 'The Conquest of the Syrian Desert', reprinted from *The Commercial Motor*, 7 September 1926; as well as the French High Commissioner to the French Minister for Foreign Affairs, Beirut, 14 May 1927.

[111] John Randolph, 'Desert Routes between Baghdad and the Mediterranean', *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 31 (1928), p. 18.

[112] CADN, 1SL/1/V/702, Memorandum written by the economic and agricultural services of the French High Commission, Beirut, 13 March 1926; NARA, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State relating to Internal Affairs of Asia, 1910-1929, microfilm roll 16, File 890d.79790d, U.S. Consul Knabenshue to the American Express Company, Beirut, 15 March 1927; CADC, 50CPCOM43, Kawatly, Tawil & Co. to the French High Commissioner, Beirut, 17 June 1926.

[113] 48CPCOM43, the Acting French High Commissioner to the French Foreign Minister Beirut, 14 May 1927.

[114] Michael Provence, *The Great Syrian Revolt and the Rise of Arab Nationalism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), pp. 138–143.

security prompted transport operators to reconsider running their convoys via Damascus. In late 1926/early 1927, the first cars travelled through Damascus before crossing the desert via Palmyra. In March 1927, the Nairn Eastern Transport Company resumed its regular service on the direct Baghdad–Damascus route.[115] Although by the end of 1926, the French had succeeded in crushing the insurgency and reasserting their control over Damascus and central Syria, a group of insurgents in exile in Transjordan and the Najd continued to disrupt transdesert traffic in 1927 and 1928.

The diehards of Al-Azraq and Wadi Sirhan

In the epilogue to *The Great Syrian Revolt and the Rise of Arab Nationalism*, Michael Provence traces the aftermath of the uprising after the French offensives of 1926, which led to a reassertion of colonial power in central Syria. As he writes, '[the] exiled insurgents, however, did not willingly fade into irrelevance'.[116] Historical scholarship on the Great Syrian Revolt has shown that the insurrection did not end with the bombing of Damascus and the heavy military operations of 1926 in the Ghuta and the Hawran regions.[117] Between late 1926 and 1927, although the rebel bands ceased to control the Damascus countryside, some insurgent groups continued to contest French power by conducting occasional raids. Until mid-1927, Fawzi al-Qawuqji—a former officer in the Syrian Legion turned rebel leader, who led the Hama uprising in October 1925[118]—continued to wage guerrilla warfare in the north of Damascus and attack French targets in Ghuta. Other rebel bands were still active up to the summer of 1927 in the Jebel Druze, a desert region in southern Syria known as the Lajat (*al-Lajā*), and sometimes around Damascus. These groups forced the French to sustain a high level of military mobilisation by 'maintaining a constant level of tension throughout Syria'.[119] French counteroffensives, however, compelled a number of insurgents to leave Syria and settle in the refugee camp of Al-Azraq in Transjordan. Many families from Jebel Druze resided in this camp

[115] CADC, 48CPCOM43, Nairn Eastern Transport Company to the High Commissioner for Syria, place unknown, 13 January 1928; LON, R59/1/17502/56968, Report to the Council of the League of Nations on the Administration of Iraq for the Year 1926, p.112; John Munro, *The Nairn Way*, pp. 67–73.
[116] Michael Provence, *The Great Syrian Revolt*, p. 142.
[117] Philip S. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920-1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 201–204; Laila Parsons, *The Commander: Fawzi Al-Qawuqji and the Fight for Arab Independence, 1914-1948* (London: Saqi, 2017), pp. 187–217; Michael Provence, *The Great Syrian Revolt*, pp. 142–149; Michael Provence, *The Last Ottoman Generation and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 177–178.
[118] On Fawzi al-Qawuqji, see Laila Parsons, *The Commander*. On his later role in the Palestine Revolt of 1936, see also Laila Parsons, 'Rebels without Borders: Southern Syria and Palestine, 1919–1936', in Cyrus Schayegh and Andrew Asan (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of the History of the Middle East Mandates* (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 395–407.
[119] Philip S. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, p. 203.

until April 1927, when the British expelled them from Al-Azraq and forced them to seek another place to settle. Finally, after a period of repeated displacement, some insurgents from the Great Syrian Revolt, along with their families, found refuge in Wadi Sirhan, north of the Najd, thanks to an agreement made with Ibn Saud, while others left for Amman, Jerusalem and even Cairo. This group of rebels exiled in Al-Azraq, and later in Wadi Sirhan, carried out several hold-ups of transdesert convoys between 1927 and 1928, conducting swift attacks that escaped the scrutiny of French and British patrols before fleeing by car across Syria's southern border.

On 14 January 1927, some 140 km east of Damascus, a group of a dozen men held up a convoy of the Lebanese company, Kawatly Tawil, which was transporting mail for the French authorities at the time, seizing one of the cars and kidnapping its driver. For several days, no trace of the car was found, but rumours circulated that the vehicle was either in Amman or in the hands of a nomadic tribe.[120] Subsequently, various investigations and information exchanges between the French and British administrations confirmed that the stolen car had been spotted in Amman. In the words of the French Acting High Commissioner, Transjordan was now being used as a 'base of operations' for attacks on transdesert convoys.[121] One of the owners of Kawatly Tawil provided further confirmation that cars travelling on the Baghdad–Damascus route were now at risk of being attacked by raiders crossing the Syrian–Transjordanian border. Following the theft of his car, Ayyub Tawil went in person to Al-Azraq to search for his car after gathering information indicating that he would find it there. Upon his return, he submitted a report to the High Commissioner for Syria.

The report contains a reproduction of the transcript of an interview he had with Fawzi al-Qawuqji, 'the leader of the insurgents', as he called him, interspersed with additional comments on their meeting. The interview with Fawzi al-Qawuqji focused on various topics: the state of the insurgents' forces, their demands and objectives, Ayyub Tawil's position towards them, and the question of highway robbery. According to Ayyub Tawil's report (translated into French), Fawzi al-Qawuqji insisted that contrary to French claims, the Al-Azraq insurgents were growing in strength. He maintained that they were receiving frequent supplies of arms, ammunition, food and money, which enabled them to continue their fight against the French. Ayyub Tawil presented himself to the rebel leader as an entrepreneur not concerned

[120] TNA, CO 732/23/2, Extract from Iraq Economic Report No. 76, 15 February 1927; British Consul Satow to the Foreign Office, Beirut, 25 January 1927; draft letter from J.H. Hall (Foreign Office) to General Mance, London, 16 March 1927; CADC, 48CPCOM43, Roudy (Nairn Eastern Transport Company) to the French Foreign Ministry, Paris, 25 January 1927.
[121] CADC, 48CPCOM43, telegram from Paul V. de Reffye to the French Foreign Ministry, Beirut, 5 February 1927.

with politics but only with transportation between Beirut and Baghdad. Fawzi al-Qawuqji promised him that the rebels would not attack Kawatly Tawil's cars, as it was a 'national' company. More generally, he stated that he had no intention of obstructing the movement of tourists and summer visitors through the desert. Nevertheless, he suggested that more robberies would certainly take place and advised transport operators to stop their cars at the slightest hint of gunshot to avoid the loss of human lives. Ayyub Tawil was asked to pass on the insurgents' message to other entrepreneurs.[122]

Following this meeting, Ayyub Tawil brought his car back to Beirut. His visit to the Al-Azraq camp raised questions among the French military authorities. High Commissioner Ponsot, however, decided not to press charges against him because he felt it was inevitable that 'the natives' would try to 'have it both ways' by making contact with the insurgents to guard against all risks.[123] In addition, the French gave credence to Ayyub Tawil's statement. On 25 February 1927, the Acting High Commissioner forwarded the report to the French liaison officer in Jerusalem to seek his opinion, pointing out that while the information it contained could not be considered official, it certainly held some truth. He was especially concerned that the insurgents were using Transjordan as 'a base of action' against the French and that they were planning to 'disrupt traffic on the Baghdad route'. He feared that these circumstances would force the French to send troops into Transjordan to prevent the insurgents from entering Syria.[124] On several occasions during the Great Syrian Revolt, the British allowed French troops in pursuit of insurgents to enter Transjordan.[125] However, a French military operation in Al-Azraq would have been quite different. Instead, the French kept up pressure on the British and the King of Transjordan in early 1927 to settle the problem of the Al-Azraq rebels, even accusing them of failing to act to prevent raids into Syria.[126] As Martin Thomas has pointed out, this issue was a major point of contention between the French and British authorities during the interwar period.[127]

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[122] CADC, 50CPCOM166, 'Renseignements sur le voyage à El-Azrak', translation of a report by Ayyub Tawil, 18 February 1927.
[123] CADC, 48CPCOM43, High Commissioner Ponsot to the French Foreign Minister, Beirut, 22 August 1927.
[124] CADC, 50CPCOM166, the Acting French High Commissioner to the liaison officer in Jerusalem, Beirut, 25 February 1927.
[125] V. M. Amadouny, 'The Formation of the Transjordan–Syria Boundary, 1915-32', *Middle Eastern Studies* 31:3 (1995), p. 537. See also Cyrus Schayegh on the eagerness of the British High Commissioner in Jerusalem to give the French the right to pursue fugitives across the Syrian–Palestinian border and London's hesitancy in this regard. Cyrus Schayegh, *The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 182.
[126] Philip S. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, p. 204; Martin Thomas, *Empires of Intelligence: Security Services and Colonial Disorder after 1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), pp. 165, 177–178.
[127] Martin Thomas, 'Anglo–French Imperial Relations in the Arab World: Intelligence Liaison and Nationalist Disorder, 1920–1939', *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 17:4 (2006), pp. 779–781.

FIGURE 10: THE INSURGENTS OF WADI SIRHAN, CA. 1926

Image credit: Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington D.C., 20540 USA. Matson (G. Eric and Edith) Photograph Collection. Creator: American Colony (Jerusalem), unknown photograph. Title: 'Wadi Sirhan in the Arabian Desert. Druse [i.e., Druze] political refugees from Jebel Druse'. LC-M33-3386. (No known restrictions).[128]

In March 1927, a large group of insurgents, reportedly led by Fawzi al-Qawuqji, carried out various attacks on convoys along the transdesert routes, resulting in several deaths.[129] The following month, French demands were finally met. British and Transjordanian forces marched to the camp of Al-Azraq to expel the refugees, who headed for the Syrian border before travelling further inland to Transjordan, finally settling in Qarayat al-Milh, in the Najd, within the new sultanate of Ibn Saud. Whereas the Syrian insurgents had initially found temporary refuge by crossing the Syrian–Transjordanian border, Franco–British cooperation pushed them

[128] The Library of Congress notes 'no known restrictions on publication' and states that the rights related to the G. Eric and Edith Matson Photograph Collection were transferred to the 'American public' in 2003: 'The Kensington Episcopal Home conveyed the collection to the Library in 1978. In 2003, the Home dedicated the intellectual property and related rights to the collection to the American public, subject to "whatever rights, if any, that may have previously been conveyed to others."' https://www.loc.gov/rr/print/res/258_mats.html (accessed 28 June 2022).

[129] NARA, Record Group 84, consular post, Beirut, vol. 469: Notes on the Political Situation in the Damascus Consular District during the Month of March 1927, by U.S. Consul Keenly, Damascus.

further away. Subsequently, between mid-1927 and early 1928, the situation became relatively calm and safe on the transdesert routes. The direct route between Damascus and Baghdad was fully reopened to traffic in May 1927.[130] However, the Syrian insurgents in exile did not curtail their activities. After leaving Al-Azraq, they set up their headquarters, this time, outside the French and British mandated territories. From Wadi Sirhan in the Najd region, the rebels continued to carry out raids on transdesert convoys in 1928.

In March 1928, two convoys travelling on the direct Baghdad–Damascus route were robbed in Iraqi territory between Rutbah and the Syrian border. On 12 March, a car belonging to the Iraqi company, Huwaidi & Co., was held up 30 km past Rutbah by eight men who had blocked the track with large stones. The robbers took tubes, tyres and petrol, and then let the car continue on its way. The next day, a convoy bound for Baghdad, including one car from Kawatly Tawil and two others from Huwaidi & Co, was stopped at approximately the same place. These two attacks on convoys gave rise to numerous rumours reported in the press, some suggesting that the perpetrators belonged to nomadic groups, known as the Ikhwan, from the Kingdom of Ibn Saud. The statement by one of the drivers that the bandits had driven to Transjordan after the robbery seemed to confirm this rumour.[131] The French and British authorities were very concerned about the circulation of these rumours and hearsays.[132] A few days after the raids, they issued communiqués publicly denying that the robbers were subjects of Ibn Saud.[133] British investigations in March and April revealed that they were instead 'Druze refugees' based in the Najd territory, specifically in Wadi Sirhan. Once again, the owner of a transport company served as an informant. At the end of March, Mr Huwaidi sent a

[130] Jane Priestland (ed.), *Records of Syria* (London: Archives Edition, 2005), Volume 4, pp. 348–351, 'Supervision of the Frontier between Syrian and Trans-Jordan', report drawn up by Chief British Representative Cox, Amman, 5 August 1927; CADC, 48CPCOM43, the Acting French High Commissioner to the French Foreign Minister, Beirut, 14 May 1927.

[131] CADC, 48CPCOM43, French Consul Maigret to the French Foreign Minister, Baghdad, 15 March 1928. For further details on the numerous Ikhwan raids carried out from the Najd region into Kuwait and Iraq between 1927 and 1928 that sparked these rumours, see Robert S. G. Fletcher, 'When Nomads Flee: 'Raider', 'Rebel' and 'Refugee' in Southern Iraq, 1917–30', in Jordi Tejel and Ramazan Hakkı Öztan (eds.), *Regimes of Mobility*, pp. 294–312; Daniel Silverfarb, 'Great Britain, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia: The Revolt of the Ikhwan, 1927-1930', *The International History Review* 4:2 (1982), pp. 222–248.

[132] As Martin Thomas points out, colonial administrations were just as concerned with collecting information about colonised populations as they were with controlling 'the movement of knowledge within local society'. Martin Thomas, *Empires of Intelligence*, p. 25. According to Jordi Tejel, the media played an important role in giving strength and 'authority' to certain rumours. Jordi Tejel, 'States of Rumors: Politics of Information Along the Turkish-Syrian Border, 1925–1945,' *Journal of Borderlands Studies,* Online First, pp. 12–13.

[133] Translations of the communiqués into Arabic were published in *Al-Sha'b*. AUB, ''Alā ṭarīq Baghdād', *Al-Sha'b* on 21 March 1928. See also TNA, CO 732/33/5, the High Commissioner for Iraq to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Baghdad, 14 March 1928: 'Please contradict any rumours which may arise that bandits are Akhwan.'

representative to Wadi Sirhan, who reported seeing the car that had been stolen from them on 13 March.[134]

Again, in August 1928, a dozen armed men coming from Wadi Sirhan and equipped with two cars, committed several hold-ups on the Baghdad–Damascus route.[135] The High Commissioner for Iraq immediately called for an investigation to determine the exact origin of the raiders, noting that those conducted in March had been 'disconnected and desultory' and had suffered from poor communication. He recommended that the police follow the tracks left by the robbers' cars to determine whether they had fled across the border to the Najd region.[136] It was only three weeks later that he received initial intelligence from Inspector Muhammad Yasin of the Dulaim camel corps, who had been able to follow that cars' tracks until they disappeared into the desert.[137] In the meantime, the Iraq police interviewed several drivers and passengers from the convoy that was attacked on 10 August. The various statements confirmed the suspicion that the March and August hold-ups had been committed by the same band. On the basis of these investigations, Major Cones drew up a list of six people whose involvement was supported by sufficient evidence, except in the case of Fawzi al-Qawuqji.[138] Another Iraqi police report in September 1928 stated that his involvement had now been proven.[139]

This time, dislodging the highway robbers from Wadi Sirhan posed more serious problems for the French and British, as they could not conduct offensives in Ibn Saud's territories. To prevent further attacks, the Iraqi police proposed to post an agent in Qarayat al-Milh, who could secretly inform the British authorities in Amman of preparations for a new raid in Syrian and Iraqi territory. For several months, the Iraqi police paid for this secret agent until they realised in 1929 that he had never been appointed.[140] In addition, the French and British asked Ibn Saud to take steps to prevent further raids by the insurgents based in Wadi Sirhan, and, in particular, to extradite those clearly identified as highway robbers.[141] Ibn Saud

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[134] TNA, CO 732/33/5, Economic Report No. 156, 13 April 1928.
[135] The Beirut newspaper *Al-Bayraq* gave a detailed account of the robbery based on interviews conducted with passengers and drivers. AUB, 'Ḥādithat ṭarīq Baghdād ka-annaka tarāhā', *Al-Bayraq*, 14 August 1928, p. 2.
[136] TNA, CO 732/33/5, 'Attack on Nairn Cars', note written by the High Commissioner for Iraq, Baghdad, 13 August 1928.
[137] TNA, CO 732/33/5, Memorandum drawn up by Major Cones (Inspector General of Police, Iraq), 9 September 1928.
[138] TNA, AIR 23/390, Memorandum drawn up by Major Cones, 30 August 1928.
[139] TNA, AIR 23/390, Sturges (political secretary to the High Commissioner for Iraq) to the Iraq Ministry of Interior, Baghdad, 22 September 1926; Major Cones to the Iraqi Ministry of Interior, Baghdad, 23 September 1928.
[140] TNA, AIR 23/390, High Commissioner Dobbs to the High Commissioner for Palestine, Baghdad, 15 September 1928; TNA, CO 732/39/11, Extract from Economic Report No. 135, received by the Colonial Office on 18 June 1929.
[141] TNA, AIR 23/390, Memorandum by Major Cones (Inspector General of Police, Iraq), 30 August 1928; TNA; CO 732/33/5, High Commissioner Dobbs to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Baghdad, 15 September 1928.

agreed to conduct his own investigation, but he refused to undertake extraditions. The French and British authorities then asked him to keep the insurgents away from the Transjordanian border (and thus from French and British mandated territories) so that they could not commit further attacks on the convoys.[142] By January 1929, the same demand was repeated to Ibn Saud, to whom the British remarked that the insurgents were still in a position to threaten the circulation of cars on the transdesert routes.[143]

Furthermore, the British sought another way to pressure the insurgents across state borders. Immediately after the hold-up, the Transjordan authorities set up a blockade on Wadi Sirhan, prohibiting the transport of supplies for the refugees through their territory. They also informed garage and car owners that they would seize any vehicle caught red-handed.[144] The measure had a powerful impact on several Druze leaders, including Sultan al-Atrash, another prominent figure of the Syrian Great Revolt, who had taken refuge in the Najd region. In response to the blockade, Sultan al-Atrash expelled Shakib Wahab, the alleged leader of the March and August highway robberies, from Wadi Sirhan and promised that the transdesert routes would no longer be threatened. As a result, the blockade was lifted.[145] The British doubted that 'the most unruly elements' would feel bound by this promise and were worried when, at the end of 1928, several sources again reported Wahab's presence in Wadi Sirhan.[146] At the end of the 1920s, the issue of the Wadi Sirhan insurgents remained unresolved. In 1929, the British were nevertheless in favour of relaxing the protective measures for transdesert convoys, arguing that Ibn Saud had promised to prevent raids originating from the Najd region. The French, for their part, were in favour of strengthening these measures. This issue was put on the agenda of the Desert Traffic Control Conference held in November 1929 and January 1930, to which we will return further along in this chapter.

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[142] CADN, 1SL/1/V/703, British Consul Hole to the delegate of the French High Commissioner in Damascus, Damascus, 9 December 1929, transmitting correspondence between Ibn Saud and the British agent in Jeddah dated August-September 1928; TNA, CO 732/33/5, Mance (Ottoman Bank) to John Shuckburgh (the Colonial Office), 14 December 1928 as well as Shuckburgh's reply to Mance, 19 December 1928.

[143] TNA, AIR 23/390, secretariat of the High Commissioner for Iraq to the Iraqi Ministry of Interior, Baghdad, 4 January 1929.

[144] CADN, 1SL/1/V/703, 'Undertaking given by Druze leaders', Appendix No. 3 to Hole's note dated 9 December 1929; AUB, 'Al-thuwwār wa ḥādith qāfilat Baghdād', *Al-Bayraq*, 24 August 1928, p. 3.

[145] TNA, AIR 23/390, secretariat of the High Commissioner for Iraq to the British consul in Beirut, Baghdad, 22 September 1928; CADN, 1SL/1/V/703, French liaison officer in Jerusalem to the French High Commissioner, Jerusalem, 8 December 1928. According to the above-mentioned 'Undertaking given by Druze leaders', the blockade was lifted in December 1928, which contradicts records from other sources. It is possible that either the date given in this document is inaccurate (the document is part of a later correspondence) or that the blockade was temporarily resumed in December 1928.

[146] TNA, CO 732/33/5, the Acting High Commissioner for Transjordan to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Jerusalem, 4 September 1928; TNA, AIR 23/390, Peake (officer commanding the Arab Legion), Amman, 2 October 1928; the British Resident to the High Commissioner for Iraq, Amman, 11 November 1928.

The phenomenon of highway robbery reveals how Bedouin, bandits and rebels appropriated the technology of motorised transport to move quickly across the desert borderlands of Syria, Iraq and Transjordan. The use of cars by non-state actors in these regions posed a considerable challenge for the Mandate authorities. As Mehdi Sakatni has shown, Bedouin tribes in the Syrian Desert quickly adapted to the expansion of motorised transport and found ways to make the most of it. Cars helped the nomadic tribes not only to strengthen their commercial links with Syria's urban centres but also to develop a new way of conducting raids. Their increasing reliance on cars caused concern among French administrators, who feared that this situation 'would eventually deprive the colonial power of its technical superiority'.[147] Likewise, during the interwar years, drug smugglers operating between Lebanon and Palestine took advantage of the motorisation of transport.[148] These examples highlight the ways in which non-elite groups used technologies to advance their own agendas and even to 'contest the power of dominant groups'.[149] The group of exiled insurgents from Transjordan and the Najd continued to disrupt transdesert traffic between 1927 and 1928, taking advantage of the porous borders of the post-Ottoman states. Their robberies prompted the French and British to cooperate and agree on a common security policy, including the expulsion of the rebels from their respective mandate territories. However, their removal to the Najd, and thus out of French and British jurisdiction, enabled some groups of highway robbers to evade their control.

The Infrastructure of Security

Faced with the difficulty of maintaining security for convoys travelling several hundred kilometres across the desert, the French and British decided to establish police stations along the main routes for use by motorised and camel police detachments. Prior to the opening of the Baghdad–Damascus route in 1923, the two main desert police and gendarmerie posts in Syrian territory were located at Palmyra and Deir ez-Zor, where *Méhariste* companies had been established in 1921. In Iraqi territory, the government constructed police stations in most of the towns and villages along the Euphrates between Baghdad and Deir ez-Zor. As it had become apparent that highway robberies were easily perpetrated in the desert, in October 1925, the

[147] Mehdi Sakatni, 'From Camel to Truck?', p. 164.
[148] Cyrus Schayegh, 'The Many Worlds of Abud Yasin; or, What Narcotics Trafficking in the Interwar Middle East Can Tell Us about Territorialization,' *The American Historical Review* 16:2 (2011), pp. 273–306.
[149] Thomas Misa, *Leonardo to the Internet: Technology and Culture from the Renaissance to the Present* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), p. 314.

British decided to build a police post located on each of the two desert tracks; one at Muhaiwir on the route to Palmyra, and one at Rutbah on the direct route to Damascus.[150]

Police outposts in the desert

Before the Rutbah Post was revamped as a hotel offering travellers a midway stop, as described in the previous chapter, it was mainly intended to facilitate the surveillance of border areas. In fact, it was during the Great Syrian Revolt that the British thought of building a fortified post at Rutbah Wells to accommodate the patrols that would accompany the Nairn convoys travelling to and from Amman at that time.[151] Upon completion of the building in mid-1926, the Rutbah police outpost housed garrisons whose task was to 'bring the desert tribes under more effective control'.[152] Like the French *Méhariste* headquarters in Palmyra, Rutbah was an outpost to which troops could be despatched to intercept tribal raids and track down bandits. As Iain Jackson has pointed out, the Rutbah Post was used 'to monitor the Syrian border (both physically and through telecommunications) and to provide advance warnings of attack or large convoys of goods approaching Baghdad'.[153]

Similarly, whereas previously patrols had to be sent from Palmyra or Damascus, the Great Syrian Revolt prompted the French to consider building one or more police stations between Damascus and the Iraqi border to provide better security for convoys using the direct route. In early 1927, construction of a post was initiated at Abu Shamat, known as Khan Abu Shamat, with the aim of 'extending the radius of surveillance of the route eastwards' or, in other words, to ensure that the protection of convoys extended further towards the Iraqi border.[154] The following year, the French established another police station at Sabaa Biyar (Sab'at Bi'ār, literally 'seven wells'), which was officially known as *Poste Descarpentries*, after the French captain who was killed in the desert in September 1925. Sabaa Biyar was located on the Baghdad–Damascus route about 80 km past Abu Shamat towards Rutbah. This post enabled the French police to extend its reach further into the Syro–Iraqi borderlands. It hosted a

[150] TNA, AIR 23/293, Report from the Special Service Officer, Ramadi, for the fortnight ending 8 October 1925; TNA, AIR 23/294, 'Report on a Tour in the Shamiyah by the S.S.O. Ramadi', 2 March 1926.
[151] TNA, AIR 23/87, telegram from the High Commissioner for Iraq to the High Commissioner for Palestine, Baghdad, 21 September 1925.
[152] LON, R59/1/17502/51544, Report by His Britannic Majesty's Government to the League of Nations on the Administration of 'Iraq for the Year 1925, p. 122.
[153] Iain Jackson, 'The Architecture of the British Mandate in Iraq: Nation-Building and State Creation', *The Journal of* Architecture 21:3 (2016), p. 395.
[154] CADC, 48CPCOM43, telegram from Paul V. de Reffye to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Beirut, 29 January 1927; CADC, 50CPCOM166, the Acting French High Commissioner to the French Foreign Ministry, Beirut, 3 March 1927. Initially, work was delayed because the boreholes had not yielded any water: TNA, FO 371/12269, British consul to the Foreign Office, Damascus, 16 February 1927.

Méhariste company and was later equipped with a radiotelegraphy station, thus serving as a staging post to monitor the desert and ensure traffic safety.[155] The four British and French posts established at Ramadi, Rutbah, Sabaa Biyar and Abu Shamat formed the security backbone of the Baghdad–Damascus route by the late 1920s.[156]

A transnational network of wireless telegraphy

The many highway robberies that occurred during and after the Great Syrian Revolt also prompted Mandate officials and desert administrators to promote the development of better communications infrastructure across the Syrian Desert. As mentioned earlier, the high level of insecurity that prevailed in August and September 1925 combined with the experience of the Bir Mulusa 'monthly liaison' spotlighted the difficulties associated with a lack of communications equipment, the poor practices of the administrators and delays in the transmission of messages. Consequently, the various actors engaged in securing the transdesert routes became convinced of the need to expand the use of wireless telegraphy. The British established a wireless station in Rutbah in late 1926, which made it easier to organise motorised traffic between Iraq, Syria and Transjordan.[157] In addition, the French and British took steps to improve communication between their air forces, camel corps and motorised troops, but the threat posed by the Wadi Sirhan insurgents to transdesert traffic required more comprehensive arrangements. In response to raiders, who crossed the borders of Transjordan, Iraq and Syria with ease and impunity, the French and British envisaged the development of a communications infrastructure that would also extend across state borders.

In the aftermath of the highway robbery of 10 August 1928, British and French officers began discussions focusing on the establishment of wireless communications between the Iraqi telegraph station at Rutbah and the Syrian station at Sabaa Biyar. A conclusion that emerged from these discussions was that if the French police in Sabaa Biyar had been able to communicate quickly with Rutbah and Amman upon learning of the attack, the offenders could have been arrested. Eager to cooperate, the French delegate and the military authorities in Damascus immediately investigated the technical conditions required to establish wireless

[155] TNA, CO 732/33/5, Colonel Lelong to British Consul Hole, Damascus, 18 August 1928; Hole to the High Commissioner for Iraq, Damascus, 21 August 1928; CADC, 50CPCOM588, Note on the Routes from Beirut and Haifa to Baghdad, 21 May 1935.
[156] In 1929, the French consul in Iraq, Paul Lépissier proposed to install lights visible from afar at these four posts ('*les 4 postes franco-anglais du parcours*'). CADC, 50CPCOM360, Paul Lépissier to the French High Commissioner, Baghdad, 10 October 1929.
[157] LON, R2314/6A/655/6774, British Report to the League of Nations on the Administration of Iraq, 1927, p. 150.

communication between Sabaa Biyar and Rutbah.[158] British Major Elphinston proposed using a code that could be easily and quickly transmitted between the British and French administrators upon news of a new hold-up. For example, 'Nebek 180 0800' would mean that the rebels based in Nebek in Wadi Sirhan had committed a robbery at 180 km from Rutbah and at 8.00 a.m.[159]

In addition to communication deficiencies, the French and British administrators found that the hierarchical organisation of the process of transmitting messages was another reason for the failure to capture highway robbers. Messages sent by the administrative commanders at Rutbah were first transmitted to Baghdad before being forwarded to Amman. Consequently, news of the 10 August attack reached the RAF authorities in Transjordan after such a lengthy delay that the robbers could not be tracked down. Under these conditions, the British recognised that wireless communication would not be effective unless direct communication between the desert posts was sanctioned.[160] Commencing from October 1928, the police authorities in Rutbah and Amman were now authorised to communicate directly via radiotelegraphy and to take the decision to intercept raiders without referring to the British High Commission in both countries.[161] Finally, there were also discussions about linking the RAF station at Amman with the station at Sabaa Biyar. As Harry C. Luke, the British High Commissioner for Transjordan, pointed out, this additional connection would complete the 'triangular network of intelligence' aimed at intercepting any raiders crossing the borders of Iraq, Syria and Transjordan.[162]

Notwithstanding these good intentions, the realisation of the project proved challenging. To begin with, the French High Commissioner was slow to give his assent, and the British were still awaiting his response in January 1929.[163] He finally informed the British consul in Damascus in early February that he agreed to the establishment of a Rutbah–Descarpentries–Amman communications network. The integration of Amman into the network required

[158] TNA, CO 732/33/5, Colonel Lelong to British Consul Hole, Damascus, 18 August 1928; Hole to Henry Dobbs High Commissioner for Iraq, Damascus, 21 August 1928; Henry Dobbs to the Acting High Commissioner for Palestine, Baghdad, 15 September 1928.
[159] TNA, AIR 23/390, 'Notes of Conversation' between Major Elphinston (the Iraq Army) and Colonel Lelong (the French Chief of Staff, Damascus), 11 August 1928.
[160] TNA, AIR 23/390, a letter from Sturges (the political secretary to the High Commissioner for Iraq) to the Iraq Ministry of Interior, Baghdad, 27 August 1928; TNA, CO 732/33/5, the Acting High Commissioner for Transjordan to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Jerusalem, 4 September 1928.
[161] TNA, CO 732/33/5, High Commissioner Dobbs to the Acting High Commissioner for Palestine, Baghdad, 15 September 1928; Harry Charles Luke (Acting High Commissioner for Transjordan) to Henry Dobbs, Jerusalem, 12 October 1928. It seems that later on, direct communications between the local Syrian and Iraqi authorities ceased altogether. In 1932, the Iraqi Foreign Ministry requested that this procedure be reinstated. CADC, 50CPCOM458, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the French Embassy, Baghdad, 27 November 1932.
[162] TNA, CO 732/33/5, Harry Charles Luke to the British consul in Beirut, Jerusalem, 12 October 1928.
[163] TNA, FO 371/13745, Extract from Economic Report No. 124, attached to a letter from the Colonial Office, 17 January 1929.

political and technical adjustments, particularly with regard to the wavelength used, but it finally came about.[164] Yet the operation of this 'triangular network of intelligence' on the ground remained far from effective. In November 1929, Major Cones of the Iraqi police complained that the French operators at Sabaa Biyar were not fulfilling their duties. During his investigations on the spot, he found that between 4 August and 4 September 1929, 'Seba Biar had acknowledged Rutbah only twice in ninety routine calls'.[165] This new point of contention between the French and the British was also put on the agenda of the Desert Traffic Control Conference held in November 1929 and in January 1930.

Impediments to Mobility

Insecurity on the transdesert routes greatly constrained the movements of travellers between Syria and Iraq. During the Great Syrian Revolt, the main routes linking Beirut and Damascus to Baghdad were often closed to traffic for a few days or months and even for more than a year in the case of the direct route. Prevailing uncertainty about the state of security also discouraged travellers from travelling through the Syrian Desert and led to a decline in tourist traffic. During the uprising, U.S. consuls constantly advised their nationals against visiting Syrian tourist sites and taking the desert routes.[166] In November 1925, Norman Nairn lamented that his company had suffered a loss of income: 'The revolution has been most unfortunate as this would undoubtedly have proved to be our best season.'[167] Moreover, not only did the lack of security cause a halt or decline in transdesert mobility but it also resulted in new traffic regulations that were closely associated with several impediments to mobility.

During the 1920s, transdesert traffic intensified steadily between Damascus and Baghdad, but it was also increasingly organised and regulated. The safety measures implemented to reduce the risks of breakdowns and robberies in the desert introduced many restrictions on mobility. At first, the governments of Lebanon, Syria and Iraq required cars to travel in convoys and to undergo examinations. The convoy system also brought about a tighter organisation of transdesert traffic, with the introduction of schedules and the obligation for

[164] CADN, 1SL/1/V/703, British Consul Satow to the French High Commissioner, Beirut, 2 April 1929; the British vice-consul to the French High Commissioner, Beirut, 15 April 1929; LON, British Report to the League of Nations on the Administration of Iraq for the year 1928, p. 127.
[165] TNA, FO 371/13745, 'Notes Prepared by Mr Empson on the Informal Discussions Preliminary to the Iraq-Syrian Overland Route Conference', attached to a letter from British Consul Hole, Damascus, 18 November 1929.
[166] NARA, Record Group 84, consular post, Aleppo, vol. 116, U.S. Consul Keeley to the Secretary of State, Damascus, 10 September 1925; NARA, Record Group 84, consular post, Beirut, vol. 468, U.S. Consul Knabenshue to the Secretary of State, Beirut, 26 August 1926; NARA, Record Group 84, consular post, Beirut, Lebanon vol. 469, U.S. Consul Keeley to the Secretary of State, Damascus, 13 April 1927.
[167] TNA, FO 371/10831, Norman Nairn to Albert Stern, Beirut, 26 November 1925.

transport contractors to inform the relevant authorities of the departure of their convoy. Subsequently, the establishment of military escorts following numerous attacks in late 1925 required companies and independent drivers to ply their cars on specific 'protected days'.[168] In the aftermath of the Great Syrian Revolt, the authorities and police forces in Syria and Iraq did not stick to any one system; at times they organised escorts twice a week, sometimes thrice a week, and at other times, they reverted to the previous system of patrols. Overall, however, these limitations on traffic days severely impeded and slowed down mobility.

Complications, delays and bottlenecks

Besides these restrictions, the implementation of the security measures presented serious practical difficulties, which in turn caused obstacles and delays. First of all, the smooth running of the convoys required that the cars actually left Damascus and Baghdad at the same time and that they maintained a similar speed throughout the journey. However, even when the cars gathered in convoys before departure, the drivers rarely stayed close to each other during the journey. As Paul Lépissier, the French *chargé d'affaires* in Iraq pointed out, the cars rarely followed each other; rather, they crossed the desert at their own pace, meeting up only after proceeding for 100 to 150 km and then again following their own tracks. In reality, the Baghdad–Damascus route comprised numerous tracks that sometimes extended over a distance of 10 to 20 km in width. Lépissier noted that cars leaving at the same time on either side of the desert often arrived 12 to 15 hours apart at the other destination. In his view, the convoy system was nothing more than a 'simple convention of solidarity' between drivers.[169] Several travellers made the same observation, noting that Rutbah was the gathering place where the different cars within a convoy would meet before embarking on the next leg of the journey. Passengers in the fastest cars within a convoy sometimes had to wait for several hours in Rutbah for the rest of the cars to catch up.[170]

The loose implementation of the convoy system also complicated the organisation of armed escorts. In March 1928, after two convoys had been held up between Rutbah and Jebel Tenf, the British determined that the section passing through Wadi Hauran should be secured.

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[168] Reference to the 'protected days' can be found in TNA, FO 371/13745, Extract from Economic Report No. 137, attached to a letter from the Colonial Office dated 16 July 1929.

[169] CADC, 50CPCOM360 Paul Lépissier (the French consul in Iraq) to the French High Commissioner, Baghdad, 10 October 1929. See also Freya Stark, *Beyond Euphrates: Autobiography 1928-1933* (London: Murray, 1951), p. 82: 'The tracks are innumerable, every car leaving its mark, and leading one quite easily astray.'

[170] See for instance, Maurice Honoré, *Vers Bagdad* (Paris: Pierre Roger, 1929), p. 168; Ameen Rihani, *Qalb al-ʿIraq* (Beirut: Ṣader, 1935), p. 66; Henry Vallotton-Warnery, *Sur une six-roues: de Paris au Caire par Constantinople et Bagdad* (Lausanne: Ed Spes, 1927), p. 141.

To this end, the Iraqi police established their own escort to accompany convoys arriving from Damascus between the Iraqi border and Rutbah. However, the cars arrived at the meeting point at markedly different times, causing extensive delays. After the Nairn convoy was held up for several hours waiting for the other cars, the British insisted to the French that the cars should leave Damascus at 8 a.m. in order for all the cars to arrive together at the meeting point at 7 p.m.[171] The issue came up again in August 1928 during a meeting between French and British officers held in Damascus. The French explained that they had given up providing escorts because the different speeds of the cars and their varying departure times made the system unworkable and caused 'delay to everyone'. Instead, Syrian police now patrolled the desert intermittently and used aircraft to maintain surveillance from the air. The British felt that the Iraqi police could adopt a similar system, but they still maintained that the cars should leave Damascus and Rutbah at fixed times.[172] For some time, the French patrols continued to liaise with the British escorts, but commencing from 5 February 1929, they no longer kept to the rendezvous.[173]

The poor implementation of traffic regulations stemmed from practical difficulties and a lack of coordination, while also reflecting a widespread desire to ease and speed up transdesert mobility. French and British officials and desert administrators on both sides were concerned that the measures introduced since the first highway robberies overly restricted mobility between Syria and Iraq. For example, the ban on night driving imposed after the attacks conducted on the 12 and 13 of March 1928, raised much criticism.[174] In June 1929, High Commissioner Ponsot reported to his British counterpart, Gilbert Clayton, that the Iraqi police were no longer holding back convoys that arrived too late at Rutbah to reach Abu Shamat before sunset, as had been agreed. Consequently, they were crossing the 'danger zone' when it was not guarded by French patrols.[175] Gilbert Clayton responded by stating that Iraqi police were now allowing cars to travel at night to spare travellers the 'discomfort, if not hardship' of daytime travel during the hot season. The cars arrived at Rutbah at 10 p.m. and left after a short

[171] TNA, CO 732/33/5, Extract from Economic Report No. 105, 31 March 1928.
[172] TNA, AIR 23/390, 'Notes of Conversation' between Major Elphinston (Iraq Army) and Colonel Lelong (French Chief Staff, Damascus), 11 August 1928.
[173] TNA, FO 371/13745, Commandant of Police, Dulaim Liwa, to the Mutasarrif of Dulaim Liwa, 25 February 1929; Kamil al-Gilani (Secretary to the Ministry for Foreign Affairs) to the High Commissioner for Iraq, Baghdad, 9 March 1929; Empson (consular secretary to the High Commissioner for Iraq) to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Baghdad, 19 April 1929.
[174] AUB, 'Ḥadith min Jaʿfar Bāshā ʿan al-ʿIrāq', *Al-Shaʿb*, 18 March 1928; TNA, CO 732/33/5, Osborne Mance (Ottoman Bank) to John Shuckburgh (the Colonial Office), London, 14 December 1928.
[175] TNA, CO 732/39/11, French High Commissioner Ponsot to British High Commissioner Clayton, Beirut, 24 June 1929.

break, headed for Syria with an armed escort. He noted that they entered the 'danger zone' shortly before sunrise but were definitely able to reach Abu Shamat before sunset.[176]

Restrictions on transdesert traffic also caused problems at peak times. Traffic was particularly heavy at the start and end of the summer, given that many Iraqi families spent the warm season in Syria and Lebanon.[177] In addition, traffic between Damascus and Baghdad increased during the summer months because during this time, British administrators travelled to and from Europe with their families on holiday.[178] The increase in traffic, combined with its limitation to certain days of the week, created congestion. In March 1927, the British informed the French that the following month, two convoys would cross the Syrian part of the Baghdad–Damascus route on a day other than Friday (the 'protected day'). They justified this breach of the agreed arrangement by stating that too many people were travelling at that time because of the 'rush leave season'.[179] Twice a year, too, transdesert traffic intensified exponentially, as hundreds of Muslim pilgrims passed through Iraq and Syria on their way to Mecca or returned home to Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan and even India.[180] In 1929, the large number of pilgrims arriving in Damascus from Mecca disrupted transdesert traffic. The French therefore decided not to restrict the movements of pilgrim convoys to 'protected days' to avoid major congestion in Damascus.[181]

Another place on the Baghdad–Damascus route that was prone to overcrowding was Rutbah. The hotel did not have enough rooms for all the travellers who wanted to stay overnight. This was all the more of a problem, as traffic was only allowed on certain days of the week. Following numerous complaints from travellers about the lack of accommodation, the Iraqi authorities built more rooms, which became available starting from 1928.[182] However, the problem continued, and new complaints came in. For example, in May 1929, the Beirut representative of the tourism agency, Thomas Cook & Son, asked the Nairn Transport Company for explanations concerning two of their clients who had not been able to obtain accommodation

[176] TNA, FO 371/13745, Clayton to Ponsot, Baghdad, 29 July 1929.
[177] On the summering of Iraqis in Lebanon, see Chapter 6 of this dissertation.
[178] LON, R981/12B/49676/61055, the Ministry of the Interior, Health Directorate, Baghdad, to the *Conseil sanitaire maritime et quarantenaire*, Cairo, 18 August 1927.
[179] TNA, CO 732/23/2, extract from Economic Report No. 79, 29 March 1927.
[180] Chapter 5 of this dissertation discusses hajj pilgrims travelling along the Baghdad–Damascus route on their way to or from Mecca. For an example of this periodic increase in traffic, see: LON, R981-12B-49616-61055, Inspector General of Health to Major Thomson (president, Quarantine Board of Egypt), Baghdad, 18 August 1927.
[181] TNA, FO 371/13745, extract from Economic Report No. 137, attached to a letter from the Colonial Office, 26 July 1929.
[182] TNA, CO 732/39/11, Wheatley (advisor, Iraq Ministry of Works and Communications) to Empson (consular secretary, High Commission for Iraq), Baghdad, 7 August 1929.

in Rutbah, even though a reservation request had been made.[183] The Nairn Transport Company and the Iraqi government had divergent positions on this issue. Norman Nairn blamed the inflexible 'first come, first served' rule imposed by the Iraqi government, which prohibited travellers from booking rooms in Rutbah.[184] For his part, the British advisor to the Iraqi Ministry of Communications and Works recalled that the government had built the Rutbah Post and the hotel at its own expense and opposed a change of rule as long as the hotel was run by the Nairn Transport Company. In his view, the overcrowding at Rutbah was primarily due to the prevailing restrictions on transdesert traffic, arguing that 'there would not be congestion' if traffic was allowed every day of the week. He concluded that: 'Perhaps the time has arrived to suggest to the French Authorities the removal of such restrictions.'[185]

The time was evidently ripe for the French and British officials to rethink their common system for organising and securing transdesert traffic. In the late 1920s, many administrators in Iraq and Syria were eager to discuss the matter jointly. It was widely acknowledged that there were serious shortcomings in the joint management of motorised traffic between Syria and Iraq.[186] One incident, in particular, attracted widespread attention. In April 1928, a lorry left Baghdad for Damascus with 25 pilgrims on board and got lost in the Syrian Desert for seven days before a rescue expedition was launched. For the British Mandate authorities, this tragic incident was further proof that there was 'no regular system for the checking in and out of the convoys'. The matter was made worse by the great public outcry over the incident, as 'one of the passengers died of thirst and […] the incident received world-wide press'.[187] The Swiss journalist William Martin, who travelled through the Syrian Desert in 1929, reported the misadventure of these pilgrims in a dramatic tone, noting that they had died after trying to drink the gasoline from their car. The article was even translated into Arabic and published in the Baghdad daily, *Al-Bilad,* in December 1929.[188]

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[183] TNA, CO 732/39/11, Thomas Cook & Son to Mr Kettaneh (Thomas Cook & Son's agent, Beirut), Jerusalem, 18 May 1929; Thomas Cook & Son to Nairn Transport Company, Beirut, 21 May 1929.
[184] TNA, CO 732/39/11, Norman Nairn to Sir Osborne, Beirut, 7 June 1929.
[185] TNA, CO 732/39/11, Wheatley (Iraq Ministry of Works and Communications) to Empson (consular secretary, High Commission for Iraq), Baghdad, 7 August 1929.
[186] See for instance: TNA, FO 424/632, British Consul Satow to Sir Austen Chamberlain, Beirut, 12 January 1928: '[…] I incline to the belief that the various regulations intended to safeguard travelers are far from being strictly enforced, and that it would be worth the while of the Syrian and Iraq authorities to arrange a meeting to discuss the question. […].' See also TNA FO 371/13745, Robert Parr to Gilbert Clayton, Damascus, 11 May 1929.
[187] TNA, FO 371/13745, secretariat of the High Commissioner for Iraq to the Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Baghdad, 10 April 1929.
[188] William Martin, 'La traversée du désert', *Journal de Genève*, 20 November 1929, p. 1–2. https://www.letempsarchives.ch/page/JDG_1929_11_20/1/article/6619175/d%C3%A9sert (accessed 13 May 2022); AUB, 'Min Baghdād 'ilā Jinīf', *Al-Bilad*, 10 December 1929, p. 4.

The Desert Traffic Control Conference (1930)

On 10 November 1929, French and British delegates took part in preliminary discussions in Damascus, aimed at paving the way for an upcoming conference. The Desert Traffic Control Conference—also referred to as the Overland Route Control Conference—was held in Damascus on 22–23 January 1930. The aim of the two meetings was to coordinate the organisation of traffic and to harmonise Syrian and Iraqi practices to secure the transdesert route, but also to address other issues related to transdesert traffic, such as signposting, vehicle taxation and truck weights. Another objective of the conference was to discuss the possibility of removing or easing traffic restrictions in order to reduce delays and congestion and promote unhindered mobility. Only French and British delegates attended the conference. The British despatched Major Cones, the Inspector General of the Iraqi police, who was accompanied by the British consul and vice-consul in Damascus. The consular secretary of the High Commissioner for Iraq also attended the preliminary meeting, as Syro–Iraqi communications concerning transdesert traffic were channelled through Iraq's consular representatives in Syria.[189] On the Syrian side, the High Commissioner's delegate in Damascus, Mr Veber, was accompanied by a colleague from the delegation in Damascus and by Colonel Tracol from the intelligence services.[190]

The French and British delegates found common ground regarding the need to strengthen cross-border cooperation. They recommended increased direct communication between the French and British police chiefs in Iraq and Syria on matters relating to tribal raids, coordination of security actions and desert crossings outside of the 'protected days'. They also recommended the establishment of common regulations setting out the requirements for the condition of vehicles, fuel, water and food supplies, the maximum number of passengers per car, and so on.[191] However, the question of security and traffic restrictions generated more

[189] TNA, FO 371/13745, Extract from Economic Report No. 145 for the fortnight ending 18 October 1929: 'The Iraq Government do not apparently wish to depute an Iraqi official to accompany Major Cones. This is perhaps as well, since their channel for correspondence regarding overland route administration is still through the British consular officers in Syria. If and when Iraqi consuls are appointed in Syria, in will perhaps be found desirable to convene a more representative conference.'

[190] TNA, FO 371/13745, 'Note on the Informal Discussions Preliminary to the Iraq–Syrian Overland Route Conference Proposed for January Next'; CADN, 1SL/1/V/703, 'Conférence syro-irakienne sur le contrôle du trafic de la route Damas-Bagdad'.

[191] For the minutes of the two conference meetings, see TNA, FO 371/13745, 'Note on the Informal Discussions Preliminary to the Iraq-Syrian Overland Route Conference Proposed for January Next'; 'Notes Prepared by Mr. Empson on the Informal Discussions', attached to a letter from Hole (British consul, Damascus) to Henderson (the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs), 18 November 1929; CADN, 1SL/1/V/703, 'Conférence syro-irakienne sur le contrôle du trafic de la route Damas-Bagdad'; 'Note relative à la Conférence syro-irakienne des 22 et 23 janvier 1930 sur le contrôle du trafic de la route Damas-Bagdad'; CADN, 1SL/1/V/566, 'Procès-verbal de la conférence

heated discussions. At the preliminary conference, the British delegates were very eager to encourage their relaxation. The strongest advocate of their abolition was Major Cones, who drafted a memorandum strongly recommending that night travel be allowed at all times:

> By permitting night travelling, journeys will be completed quicker and this will naturally be appreciated in business circles.
>
> Moreover, the accommodation at Rutba is limited and night travelling serves to lessen congestion there and thereby adds to the comfort of travellers.
>
> It has also been represented that in the winter months it is often possible to rush through a storm, whereas a delay of a few hours at Rutba would render the ground impassable.[192]

The British also called for greater flexibility in the organisation of summer traffic and, more generally, supported the relaxation of all safety regulations that impeded traffic. Conversely, the French were reluctant to ease traffic restrictions, fearing that the absence of highway robberies in recent months was purely due to luck. To convince their colleagues, the British put forward several 'guarantees' that the insurgents who had taken refuge in the Najd region would not commit further attacks. The first was a copy of a letter received on 1 September 1928 from King Ibn Saud, in which he assured them that he had taken the necessary measures to prevent any incursions into Iraq and Syria from his territory. The second was the commitment given by Sultan al-Atrash and other leaders in Wadi Sirhan that they would prevent the band from undertaking other raids. The third was the establishment of wireless communication between Amman, Rutbah and Sabaa Biyar.[193]

The French appeared to be convinced by these assurances and showed up on the first day of the official conference on 22 January 1930 with a much more favourable attitude towards the easing of traffic restrictions. Mr Veber stated that the 'principle of freedom of traffic' should now be recommended to the High Commissioners in Syria and Iraq.[194] To everyone's surprise, however, Mr Cones had changed his position. He first showed some reluctance and indicated that the Iraqi government wanted to remove the restrictions but only in stages. To begin with, the Mandate authorities would allow only pilgrim and goods convoys to travel on all days of the week and would maintain the principle of 'protected days' for so-called ordinary passenger

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syro-irakienne tenue à Damas les 22 et 23-I-30 au sujet du trafic transdésertique'. See also TNA, FO 371/13745, Note by Major Cones on 'Direct Liaison between Control Authorities', November 1929.

[192] TNA, FO 371/13745, Note by Major Cones on 'Night Travelling', November 1929.

[193] TNA, FO 371/13745, Empson (secretary to the High Commissioner for Iraq) to the British consul in Damascus, Baghdad, 17 November 1929; Extract from Economic Report No.147 for the fortnight ending 15th November 1929.

[194] CADN, 1SL/1/V/703, 'Note relative à la Conférence syro-irakienne des 22 et 23 janvier 1930 sur le contrôle du trafic de la route Damas-Bagdad'.

convoys. In his opinion, this arrangement would be sufficient to 'relieve congestion' along the Baghdad–Damascus route during the two days when military patrols escorted the convoys. Unfortunately, the British sources do not explain the reason for Major Cones' change of stance. From the French perspective, this was a well-thought-out strategy to further the interests of an Iraqi transport company that carried only pilgrims and goods, as indicated in a handwritten note on the French memorandum on the conference.[195] The French delegates objected to Major Cones' proposal, arguing that such a measure would lead to differential treatment of pilgrims and other travellers and could convey the impression to the League of Nations that the Mandate authorities did not attach the same importance to everyone's safety.

Ultimately, the conference did not result in clear recommendations on desert traffic regulations. The French and British delegates recommended abolishing the little-used Sunday convoy and fixing the departures of convoys from Abu Shamat and Rutbah so that they did not travel at night through the most dangerous stretches. However, they encouraged governments to examine the feasibility of re-establishing free movement for the 'three categories of transport', namely goods, pilgrims and ordinary travellers. They also recommended that rather than taking the direct Baghdad–Damascus route, pilgrims should be advised to travel via Mosul, Deir ez-Zor, Palmyra and Damascus on their way to Mecca. This measure was intended to prevent an influx of pilgrims to Abu Shamat, Rutbah and Ramadi and thus ease the movements of other types of travellers. Finally, the delegates agreed that pilgrim convoys could occasionally travel on the direct route on days that were not 'protected days' if—and only if—the competent authorities were informed in advance.[196] In short, the delegates at the Desert Traffic Control Conference did not formally recommend restoring free movement through the Syrian Desert; they merely suggested that the relevant authorities continue to explore this possibility over time. At the time, it was considered too early to relax or abolish safety-oriented traffic rules, such as the convoy and escort system. Instead, delegates suggested a series of measures to fluidify traffic on the Baghdad–Damascus route through the establishment of different mobility regimes and by prioritising the speed of travel and comfort of some travellers over the safety and convenience of pilgrims.[197]

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[195] Ibid., p. 14.

[196] CADN, 1SL/1/V/703, 'Conférence syro-irakienne sur le contrôle du trafic de la route Damas-Bagdad'; 'Note relative à la Conférence syro-irakienne des 22 et 23 janvier 1930 sur le contrôle du trafic de la route Damas-Bagdad'.

[197] César Jaquier, 'Motor Cars and Transdesert Traffic: Channelling Mobilities between Iraq and Syria, 1923–1930', in Jordi Tejel and Ramazan Hakkı Öztan (eds.), *Regimes of Mobility*, pp. 247–251. On mobility regimes and differential treatment of mobility, see Valeska Huber, *Channelling Mobilities: Migration and Globalisation in the Suez Canal Region and Beyond, 1869-1914* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Jordi Tejel and Ramazan Hakkı Öztan, 'Introduction: Regimes of Mobility in Middle Eastern Borderlands, 1918–1946', in Jordi

Iraq's independence and the aftermath of the conference

The recommendations of the conference were not immediately translated into a formal agreement; quite the contrary. On many occasions during the 1930s, the British authorities, the Iraqi government and the French High Commission exchanged views on the recommendations of the Desert Traffic Control Conference and on various draft agreements on transdesert traffic. However, these years were mainly marked by numerous delays, deadlocks and postponements.[198] The discussion of an agreement on transdesert traffic was first put on the agenda of a Syrian–Iraqi economic conference, scheduled for November 1930 and subsequently postponed until April 1931. In December 1930, the High Commissioner for Iraq transmitted to the French the observations of the Iraqi Council of Ministers on the recommendations of the Desert Traffic Control Conference, thereby foregrounding the views of the Iraqi ministers. The context lent itself to putting forward the views of the Iraqi ministers. In June 1932, indeed, the British authorities and the Iraqi government had signed a new Anglo–Iraqi Treaty. Negotiated by Prime Minister Nuri al-Said, the Treaty had been strongly opposed by some opposition members of the Iraqi parliament because of the powers it retained for the British. It was nevertheless a step towards Iraq's entry into the League of Nations. In this context, the British certainly intended to give the impression of a 'transfer of power' to the Iraqi authorities by entrusting them with the examination of the French recommendations on the Desert Traffic Control Conference.[199]

The Iraqi Council of Ministers accepted most of the recommendations but rejected the abolition of the Sunday convoy and the return to free movement. Instead, they called for renewed efforts to increase the number of 'protected days' and suggested that a new police post be built between Rutbah and the Syrian border.[200] Under these conditions, the French considered that although they shared some common ground with the Iraqis on several issues, their respective positions on military escorts were irreconcilable. They therefore suggested that each government set up its own protection system.[201] Over the next two years, the Economic

Tejel and Ramazan Hakkı Öztan (eds.), *Regimes of Mobility*, pp. 1–26; Nina G. Schiller and Noel B. Salazar, 'Regimes of Mobility Across the Globe', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 39:2 (2013), pp. 183–200.

[198] In 1936, a French memorandum noted that the first discussions on an agreement on transdesert traffic went back more than seven years. CADC, 50CPCOM460, 'Note sur les affaires pendantes entre les Etats du Levant sous mandat français et l'Irak', presumably dated 1936.

[199] Peter Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq: Contriving King and Country* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), pp. 122–160, quote: p. 158. See also Adeed Dawisha, *Iraq: A Political History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 58; Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, Third edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 65.

[200] TNA, FO 371/15281, Observations by the Iraq Council of Ministers, Baghdad, dated the 6th December, 1930, upon the Recommendations of the Desert Transport Control Conference.

[201] CADN, 1SL/1/V/703, 'Note sur le projet conférence syro-irakienne' included in the file on 'Conférence économique syro-irakienne – Année 1931'.

Conference was again postponed. When discussions on transdesert traffic resumed in the summer of 1933, Iraq had become formally independent.

As historical scholarship has shown, Iraq's independence achieved in October 1932 did not represent a complete departure from the Mandate period. Importantly, the British retained certain prerogative powers. The Anglo–Iraq Treaty of 1930 guaranteed Britain's right to move troops through Iraq and to keep using two military bases on its territory after independence. Furthermore, after October 1932, many former British administrators became advisors to the Iraqi government and played a key role in maintaining British influence in Iraq. High Commissioner Humphrys, who became the British Ambassador in Iraq, continued to maintain a special relationship with King Faysal and Nuri al-Said.[202] Nevertheless, the Iraqi elites who had begun to play an increasing role in politics in the years leading up to independence, continued to gain importance. As Charles Tripp put it: 'With the achievement of independence, Iraq was formally a sovereign state which could determine its own relations with other sovereign states. This opened up considerable scope for the making of a distinctively foreign policy.'[203] Iraq's foreign relations with Mandate Syria (and Lebanon) in the 1930s constitute an interesting aspect of the negotiations on transdesert traffic.

Between 1932 and 1936, relations between successive Iraqi governments and the French Mandate authorities were particularly tense. Many questions remained pending over a period of years, such as the settlement of tribal disputes, the conclusion of a Good Neighbourhood Agreement, a tariff convention, an agreement on the expulsion of so-called 'undesirables' and, not least, the achievement of an agreement on transdesert traffic.[204] High Commissioner Damien de Martel, who assumed office in October 1933, hoped to relaunch negotiations on these issues, but he came up against the apparent 'unwillingness' of Iraqi ministers, and particularly that of Nuri al-Said. The Iraqi Foreign Minister refused to discuss these issues until he had received satisfaction on certain demands considered 'political' by the French, such as the opening of an Iraqi consulate in Damascus.[205] More generally, Paul Lépissier, the French *chargé d'affaires* in Baghdad, regretted the 'systematic resistance' of Iraqi officials to French propositions. He was told by Nuri al-Said that the Iraqi government refused to recognise French

[202] Susan Pedersen, 'Getting Out of Iraq—in 1932: The League of Nations and the Road to Normative Statehood', *The American Historical Review* 115:4 (2010), pp. 998–1,000; Peter Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq*, pp. 123–124, 158–160, 210–213; Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, pp. 63–77.
[203] Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, p. 76.
[204] Jane Priestland (ed.), *Records of Syria*, Volume 5, p. 488: Clark Kerr to Samuel Hoare (Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs), 11 June 1935.
[205] CADC, 50CPCOM458, the French High Commissioner to the French Foreign Minister, Beirut, 12 January 1934.

authority in Syria and wanted to negotiate directly with a Syrian 'constitutional government'.[206] In the months that followed, Paul Lépissier repeatedly noted that 'nationalism' was pushing the Iraqi government to avoid dealing with French representatives as much as possible. In particular, the Iraqi Foreign Ministry refused to sign any agreement bearing the words 'French Mandate in Syria', arguing that it would not receive the assent of the Council of Ministers, the Parliament or the Iraqi public.[207] Later on, Paul Lépissier also reported that 'Syrian nationalism' had acquired a strong influence in Iraq, which he felt was detrimental to Franco–Iraqi relations.[208]

Nevertheless, transdesert traffic was somehow given special attention, as the Iraqi government informed Paul Lépissier that they wished to resume negotiations on this topic independently of other outstanding issues. Therefore, in mid-1934, the French responded to Iraqi observations on the recommendations of the Desert Traffic Control Conference. At the time, transdesert traffic was still subject to certain restrictions. Although the French had recently allowed daily crossing of the desert by freight carriers, they still forbade desert crossings by passenger convoys outside of the two days a week when escorts were provided. Nonetheless, French efforts aimed at establishing 'a permanent system of security' through land patrols and air surveillance seemed to bear fruit, as the High Commission considered lifting all restrictions in the near future.[209] Despite the Iraqi government's stated intention of definitively settling the issue of transdesert traffic, it took a few more years to reach an agreement.[210] But things were moving forward in the field. In fact, although the organisation of transdesert traffic had made little progress on the diplomatic and political front during the first half of the 1930s, there had been some convergence on the ground. When negotiations resumed once again in June 1935, the British Ambassador in Baghdad remarked that the two draft agreements under discussion 'presented little difficulty as they were largely based on the procedure already established administratively'.[211] In 1936, a French memorandum made a similar observation. Although the

[206] CADC, 50CPCOM458, 'Aide-mémoire' on an interview between Paul Lépissier and Nuri al-Said, 28 January 1924.
[207] CADC, 50CPCOM459, Paul Lépissier (French *chargé d'affaires* in Iraq) to Damien de Martel (High Commissioner for Syria and Lebanon), Baghdad, 20 May 1934, 22 May 1934 and 24 November 1934.
[208] CADC, 48CPCOM62, Paul Lépissier to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Baghdad, 23 May 1935.
[209] TNA FO 684/7, British Consul Mackereth to the Foreign Office, Damascus, 16 February 1934; CADN, 1SL/1/V/703, 'Projet de réponse au memorandum irakien', French (undated) Memorandum Prepared in Response to a letter from Paul Lépissier dated 15 April 1934, LON, R4100/6A/16760/1469, French Mandate on Syria—Report on the Administration for 1934, p. 15.
[210] CADN, 1SL/1/V/702, political cabinet of the French High Commission to the French Foreign Minister, Beirut, 26 February 1937.
[211] TNA, FO 371/19021, Bateman (British Embassy) to Sir Samuel Hoare (Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs), Baghdad, 30 July 1935.

Iraqi authorities were again slow to respond, the memo noted that 'the essential provisions' had 'finally entered into force in practice'.[212]

Until well into the 1930s, transdesert traffic was governed by timetables and traffic days, and cars were required to travel in convoys and sometimes under the escort of armed guards. As we have seen, the implementation of these rules was not always rigorous, given that French and British administrators often deviated from them in order to ease mobility. Although these measures were increasingly seen as a major impediment to mobility between Syria and Iraq, and beyond, they were not, however, abolished. The content of the traffic rules on the eve of the Second World War cannot be gleaned from available sources; it is certain, however, that in 1934, passenger traffic was still only permitted on two days in the week. In short, the latent insecurity continued to constrain the authorities from lifting traffic regulations that hindered much-desired rapid and free mobility.[213]

Conclusion

The element of risk when travelling through the desert was constant during the interwar period. Approaching the Baghdad–Damascus route through the prism of insecurity, this chapter has shed new light on the potential of the transport system and conditions relating to transdesert mobility in the 1920s and most of the 1930s. The many attacks on cars and their passengers hampered the growth of transdesert traffic by creating a climate of insecurity that kept tourists, officials and other travellers from crossing the desert. At times, and especially during the Great Syrian Revolt, traffic was disrupted. Equally important was the introduction of many restrictive measures stemming from this insecurity. The Iraqi ban on transporting bulk cash across the desert, which was introduced after the theft of the Imperial Bank of Persia's gold shipment in August 1925, fuelled discussions that continued for several years, as this regulation was widely seen by French and British officials to be detrimental to the development of trade relations across the Middle East.[214] In addition, the considerable insecurity prompted governments increasingly to organise and regulate transdesert traffic by enacting measures which, in turn, hampered the speed and smooth running of traffic. The principles of convoy, escorts and

[212] CADC, 50CPCOM460, 'Note sur les affaires pendantes entre les Etats du Levant sous mandat français et l'Irak', presumably dated 1936. See also LON, R4102/6A/23330/1469, French Mandate over Syria and Lebanon —Report on Administration for 1935, p. 11.

[213] According to the Iraqi historian 'Abbas Baghdadi, the last attack on a convoy between Baghdad and Damascus took place in 1946, see Abbas Baghdadi, *Li'allā nansā: Baghdād fī l-'ishrīnāt* (Beirut: Arab Institute for Research and Publishing, 1999), p. 335.

[214] TNA, AIR 23/390, Acting British Consul Elison to the High Commissioner for Iraq, Damascus, 28 August 1928; CADC, 50CPCOM168, Hoppenot (secretariat of the French High Commission) to Elison, Beirut, 27 October 1928.

schedule greatly slowed down mobility and caused congestion at various points in the journey. As the discussion in this chapter on the 1930 Desert Traffic Control Conference and its aftermath has shown, government officials were well aware of this problem, but for a long time, they still maintained that insecurity justified these impediments. In other words, insecurity gradually transformed transdesert transport from a quasi-spontaneous private enterprise-based system to one in which centralised planning was increasing prominent. In a way, traffic regulations reduced some of the advantages that car transport enjoyed over rail transport. As John Urry has pointed out, 'the car system transformed the concept of speed into that of convenience. It provided a way of transcending a public timetable by enabling car-drivers to develop their own time-tabling of social life.'[215] However, in the Syrian Desert, car traffic not only developed as a collective transport experience in the interwar years but it also did not live up to the expectations of 'autonomy' and 'flexibility' that contemporary observers hoped for.[216]

This chapter has provided a new perspective on the emergence of the Baghdad–Damascus route by showing that the transport system was also shaped by nomadic groups, bandits and insurgents who resided in, crossed and sought refuge in the Syrian Desert. These actors, moreover, brought the borderlands to the attention of police officers and state officials, resulting in the introduction of new practices to control these desert and steppe lands. Both the French and the British administrations, albeit to varying degrees, chose to co-opt influential figures, who they expected would be able to prevent Bedouin shaykhs from raiding convoys. In addition, the Mandate states sought to exercise tighter control over the borderlands by establishing patrols of *Méhariste* companies and motorised police, as well as aerial surveillance, and by developing a security infrastructure of police stations. The Rutbah Fort held a prominent role within this infrastructure, as it helped the Iraq forces to better police the desert borderlands.

Disruption of the transport system also prompted cooperation between Mandate officials and desert administrators on both sides, as they all worked to promote transdesert mobility. Cross-border cooperation entailed the establishment of common traffic regulations, the provision and coordination of patrols and armed escorts and the development of wireless communications. Also, the coordinated establishment of patrols and escorts by French and British administrators introduced new considerations relating to the issue of territorial sovereignty. Whereas the ambiguous status of the delineation of the Syrian–Iraqi border

[215] John Urry, *Mobilities* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), p. 109.
[216] On the notion of autonomy associated with motor traffic, see Mike Featherstone, 'Automobilities: An Introduction', *Theory, Culture & Society* 21:4–5 (2004), pp. 1–2; John Urry, 'The 'System' of Automobility', *Theory, Culture & Society* 21:4-5 (2004), p. 26.

initially restrained the French and British from establishing escorts to meet at the border, they later agreed to do so on the understanding that no government could use this arrangement in the future to seek a change in the border line. Put differently, insecurity encouraged state officials to accept that police forces could, on certain occasions, cross the temporary border between Syria and Iraq. That said, the imperative to collaborate did not prevent practical disagreements and friction on the ground; nor did it end the deeper rivalry between France and Britain in the Middle East. This chapter has contributed to the study of cooperation between the Mandate states and, in particular, between Iraq and the French Mandate states, which have seldom been studied together.

While the continuing insecurity surrounding traffic led to a consolidation of state control in the borderlands of Syria and Iraq, state power in these areas remained limited. Numerous attacks on convoys took place even when police patrols and armed escorts were provided. The episode of the Great Syrian Revolt (1925–1927) shows that insurgents successfully challenged the Mandate states in the vicinity of Damascus and in the Syrian–Iraqi borderlands. In connection therewith, highway robbers were able to turn the formation of territorial states to their advantage. While the progressive definition of borders and territorial sovereignty posed an obstacle to the movement of police and military forces, it had little impact on the outlaws. This is evidenced by the group of Druze insurgents who fled to Transjordan and then to the Najd, successfully navigating the borders of the post-Ottoman states in order to commit robberies along the transdesert routes, before taking refuge under the jurisdiction of King Ibn Saud. Borders crossings could thus provide opportunities for insurgents and bandits.

Chapter 3 – Doing Business in Transport: Entrepreneurs, Competition and Transport Politics

Introduction

On 4 December 1932, the president of the Syrian Council of Ministers, Haqqi al-'Azm, wrote a letter to the High Commissioner's delegate in Damascus in which he asked the Mandate authorities to support the Syrian company, Debosh & Akkash. He pointed out that this 'national company' had been transporting passengers 'in luxury coaches and cars' between Beirut and Bagdad for many years but was now at risk of being liquidated if the French did not grant them a customs exemption. As these advantages were already being given to foreign companies, fairness demanded that Debosh & Akkash receive the same benefits.[1] Haqqi al-'Azm's intervention reveals some notable features and patterns of the transdesert transport sector during the interwar period. Specifically, it highlights the rise of a Syrian company, competition between 'national' and foreign companies, the discriminatory allocation of incentives to transdesert transport companies by the French authorities and the limited capacities of the Syrian government. These observations frame the topic and questions of this chapter, which continues the discussion on the promoters, actors and beneficiaries of the new transport system developed in Part I of this dissertation, while exploring the interactions between state and non-state actors.

This last chapter in Part I examines the development of the Baghdad–Damascus route from the perspective of the transport business sector, which attracted many Lebanese, Syrian, Iraqi and foreign entrepreneurs and investors from 1923 onwards. Before turning to transport users and their movements across and beyond the Syrian Desert in Part II, this chapter takes a closer look at the operators of the transport system, which has been examined from other standpoints in the previous chapters. Here, the focus is not so much on how the system functioned as it is on how entrepreneurs exploited motorised transport for commercial purposes and sought to remain competitive as market actors. In the 1920s and 1930s, the transdesert transport sector was particularly dynamic, being simultaneously promising and hazardous. Many companies were established and operated for a few years before going bankrupt and

[1] CADN, 1SL/1/V/702, Haqqi al-'Azm (president of the Council of Ministers) to the High Commissioner's delegate to the Syrian Republic, Damascus, 4 December 1932.

giving way to new ones, not counting the many independent drivers who also offered transport services. Entrepreneurs were confronted with a particularly competitive environment, which prompted them to develop specific services to meet demands and stand out from their competitors but also to lower their fares (even beyond profitable rates) and to consider the possibility of joining forces with their rivals. While positioning themselves strategically in relation to other transport contractors, these companies also interacted with the Mandate powers and with local governments.

The transdesert transport sector was in fact characterised by strong involvement of state authorities. From the outset, the Mandate powers encouraged the companies owned by the Nairn and Kettaneh brothers by granting them concessions for the transport of mail. The British also secured traffic for the Nairn Transport Company by entrusting them with the task of carrying British administrators across the desert. Over the years, the Mandate authorities and local governments developed a regime of incentives for transdesert transport companies which they applied in an attempt to influence the transport sector. The business of transdesert transport was the site of convergent and divergent interests between state authorities and entrepreneurs. This chapter explores their interactions and interdependence. It examines the capacities of transport companies to elicit and maintain government support as well as their influence on the political economy of transdesert transport. Conversely, it explores how state authorities encouraged transdesert traffic through various incentives, while favouring certain companies and seeking to regulate the transport sector, with a view to serving national and imperial interests.

The chapter builds on and adds to the literature on the political economy of the French and British Mandates in the Middle East. According to Omar Youssef Cheta, the 2000s saw a renewed interest among historians of the Middle East in economic history and the study of capitalism, which translated into three main research topics within the literature. The first was the economic thinking of Turkish and Arab intellectuals during the Ottoman and post-Ottoman periods. The second was the role of the middle class and their capitalist practices and the third was infrastructure and the movement of goods. On this last point, Cheta notes that there was a great deal of interest in studying how state legislation and policies shape 'a moral infrastructure that sometimes facilitates and sometimes disrupts the activities of private economic actors'.[2] This chapter pursues a similar approach, but it also examines how entrepreneurs coped with and influenced the economic policies of the post-Ottoman states and their outcomes, as well as

[2] Omar Youssef Cheta, 'The Economy by Other Means: The Historiography of Capitalism in the Modern Middle East', *History Compass* 16:4 (2018), p. 7.

Franco–British rivalry. To date, few historical studies on Lebanon, Syria and Iraq during the interwar period have paid attention to the transport sectors, and even fewer from the perspectives of their entrepreneurs.[3] This chapter addresses this gap by exploring the activities of transdesert transport entrepreneurs and their relationships with the post-Ottoman states. It also investigates these states' economic policies relating to this particular economic sector.

A broader question concerns the authority and role of governments and Mandate powers in shaping the economy. To begin with, certain economic principles were established in the context of the League of Nations Mandates. Article 11 of the Mandate texts for Syria/Lebanon and Iraq stipulated that the Mandate powers were not to discriminate between nationals of League of Nations member states and their own nationals in all economic matters.[4] The Mandate text for Syria and Lebanon specified that concessions could be granted for the exploitation of natural resources, but they should not have 'the character of a general monopoly'.[5] However the line between monopoly and concessions was not always clear, and the granting of concessions could well serve the interests of the Mandate powers. As Susan Pedersen observes, '[i]mperial history often concentrates on direct rule, but protectorates and princely states, treaties and trade concessions were also used to secure imperial interests.'[6] Historical scholarship has shown that the awarding of concessions entailed very loose application of open door principles by the Mandate powers.[7] In Iraq, for example, the British sought to advance their own interests when granting concessions for oil extraction, which led to strong protests from the U.S. government in 1930 and 1931, with the latter insisting that U.S.

[3] A few examples include Charles Issawi, *An Economic History of the Middle East and North Africa* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), pp. 52–60; Kathleen M. Langley, *The Industrialization of Iraq* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), pp. 47–48, 74–75; Frank Peter, *Les entrepreneurs de Damas*. One exception is Philippe Pétriat, 'The Uneven Age of Speed: Caravans, Technology, and Mobility in the Late Ottoman and Post-Ottoman Middle East', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 53:2 (2015), pp. 273–290.

[4] James L. Gelvin, 'Was There a Mandates Period?', in Cyrus Schayegh and Andrew Arsan (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of the History of the Middle East Mandates* (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 426; Benjamin Gerig, *The Open Door and the Mandates System: A Study of Economic Equality Before and Since the Establishment of the Mandates System* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1930), pp. 85–86, 109–112; Ramazan Hakkı Öztan, 'The Last Ottoman Merchants: Regional Trade and Politics of Tariffs in Aleppo's Hinterland, 1921–29', in Jordi Tejel and Ramazan Hakkı Öztan (eds.), *Regimes of Mobility: Borders and State Formation in the Middle East, 1918-1946* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), p. 91; Susan Pedersen, *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 233–237.

[5] For more on the Mandate texts, see: LON, R20Bis/1/9316/3800 'Mandate for Mesopotamia' and LON, R21/1/9086/4200 'Mandate for Syria and Lebanon'.

[6] Susan Pedersen, 'Getting Out of Iraq—in 1932: The League of Nations and the Road to Normative Statehood', *The American Historical Review* 115:4 (2010), p. 978.

[7] For a discussion of the multiple functions and uses of concessions in Mandate Palestine, and more widely in colonial contexts, see Ronen Shamir, *Current Flow: The Electrification of Palestine* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2013), pp. 1–23 (and footnotes No. 9 and 10).

companies be allowed to bid for the new concessions.[8] In Lebanon and Syria, the French maintained Ottoman concessions for some time before revoking them and redefining their allocation. French policy was subsequently inclined to promote the interests of well-placed and often French personalities, although some Lebanese and Syrian entrepreneurs also obtained concessions. Simon Jackson has referred to this political strategy as 'concessionary politics', highlighting the 'uncertain boundary between politics and economic development'.[9] That said, the fact that the Mandate powers used the instruments of political economy to serve national and imperial interests should not prevent us from exploring the possibility of a 'plurality of objectives', as Frank Peter advocates. In his study of industrialisation in Damascus, Frank Peter has shown that the High Commission's budgetary policy (and above all its customs policy) also sought to protect the interests of Syrian industrialists from the late 1920s onwards, sometimes even to the detriment of French merchants.[10] Overall, historians of the Middle Eastern Mandates have demonstrated that while the French and British authorities sought to promote their own interests, their policies were also informed and constrained by 'economic realities' as well as by 'societal actors [who] had their own agendas'.[11]

Evidently, the business of transdesert transport was not immune to politics. The granting of customs exemptions and subsidies could be used to protect large companies from smaller competitors perceived as posing a threat to the development of transdesert traffic as well as to pursue economic imperialism. As will become evident, however, the allocation of these incentives was a contentious and often contested process that reflected power relations and trade-offs much more than simply the agenda of a few senior officials. It generated much discussion and conflicting positions between the various individuals and departments of the Mandate states as well as between the metropolitan governments and the Mandate administrations. Foregrounding these divergent views can facilitate a deeper understanding of how economic policy was shaped in the Mandate states. The formal independence of Iraq in

[8] Annie Tracy Samuel, 'The Open Door and U.S. Policy in Iraq between the World Wars', *Diplomatic History* 38:5 (2014), pp. 930–937.
[9] Simon Jackson, 'Mandatory Development: The Political Economy of the French Mandate in Syria and Lebanon, 1915–1939' (PhD thesis, New York University, 2009), here: p. 205.
[10] Frank Peter, *Les entrepreneurs de Damas: nation, impérialisme et industrialisation* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2010), quote p. 8. Whereas Frank Peter has thoroughly examined the interactions between French Mandate authorities and Syrian industrialists, he has only briefly touched on their interactions with transdesert carriers, simply mentioning that some companies that combined local and foreign capital benefited from customs exemptions as did entirely foreign-owned companies. Ibid., p. 208.
[11] Quote: Cyrus Schayegh and Andrew Arsan, *The Routledge Handbook of the History of the Middle East Mandates* (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 9–10. See also Max Ajl, Bassam Haddad and Zeinab Abul-Magd, 'State, Market, and Class: Egypt, Syria, and Tunisia', in Joel Beinin, Bassam Haddad and Sherene Seikaly (eds.), *A Critical Political Economy of the Middle East and North Africa* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2021), p. 50.

1932 also had an impact on the relationships of transport contractors with the authorities in Baghdad, although British advisors continued to exert a strong influence on the Iraqi government in the 1930s.[12] Finally, attention must be paid to how local transport companies influenced the sector and transport policies.

Local businesses

This chapter aims to re-establish the role of local transport entrepreneurs as full-fledged actors in the development of commercial motorised transport across national and imperial spaces. In doing so, it draws on Sherene Seikaly's *Men of Capital*, which foregrounds the role of Arab businessmen, their economic discourse and their capitalist practices in Mandate Palestine. As Sherene Seikaly argues, this approach should not be limited to simply recovering these figures from the colonial discourse; it should also aim to raise new questions.[13] An examination of the rise of Lebanese, Syrian and Iraqi entrepreneurs can shed new light on the development of the Baghdad–Damascus route, on its repercussions in terms of economy and mobility as well as on the workings of the Mandate states. Addressing the key question of how and to what extent these entrepreneurs influenced the economy and politics of transdesert transport, the chapter shows that Arab entrepreneurs featured prominently in the business of transport across the Syrian Desert. So far, historical scholarship has mainly highlighted the role of the Nairn Transport Company, sometimes alluding to the Kettaneh brothers but rarely to other companies, except to minimise their importance.[14] In the present, the Nairn Transport Company remains in the public imaginary, which also contributes to its high profile.[15] The point

[12] Peter Sluglett, Peter Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq: Contriving King and Country* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), pp. 123–124, 158–160, 210–213; Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, pp. 63–77.

[13] Sherene Seikaly, *Men of Capital: Scarcity and Economy in Mandate Palestine* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), here: p. 20. Jacob Norris has also addressed this gap, asking in 2015: 'But where are the histories of Arab entrepreneurs, developers, and merchants in the 1920s and 1930s?' See Jacob Norris, 'Development and Disappointment: Arab Approaches to Economic Modernization in Mandate Palestine', in Cyrus Schayegh and Andrew Arsan (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of the History of the Middle East Mandates* (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 277.

[14] See, for example, Christina P. Grant, *The Syrian Desert: Caravans Travel and Exploration* (London: A. & C. Black, 1937), pp. 270–289; Stephen H. Longrigg, *Syria and Lebanon under French Mandate* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 278; John M. Munro, *The Nairn Way: Desert Bus to Baghdad* (New York: Caravan Books, 1980); Frank Peter, *Les entrepreneurs de Damas*, p. 208; Cyrus Schayegh, *The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017); Muhammad Mahmud al-Sayyad, *Al-naql fī al-bilād al-ʿarabiyya* (Cairo: Maʿhad al-dirāsa al-ʿarabiyya al-ʿālamiyya, 1956), p. 107; Eyad Abu Shaqra, *Warā al-miqwad ʿalā durūb al-mashriq al-ʿarabī* (place unknown: General Motors, 2006), pp. 54–60. Nile Green wrote that: 'Aside from Kettaneh, many other Arabs were employed in the new motor-transport business as drivers, writes, and guides, and also as individual taxi owners.' However, he did not provide further details. See Nile Green, 'Fordist Connections: The Automotive Integration of the United States and Iran', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 58:2 (2016), p. 304.

[15] Sources that demonstrate the elevated status of this company include the Wikipedia page devoted to the Nairn Transport Company, the web pages of several philatelists and numerous online articles on the company. A few

here is not to belittle the importance of this company and its role in the development of transdesert transport. After all, it remained in operation for several decades—until the early 1960s—and thus merits consideration. Nonetheless, the success of the Nairn Transport Company appears in a different light when transdesert traffic is viewed in practical terms. As we shall see, the intensity of movement across the Syrian Desert relied primarily on the services of Lebanese, Syrian and Iraqi transport companies. Not only did they handle most of the traffic but they also offered services at more affordable fares, thereby enabling the relative popularisation of transdesert travel. To disregard these companies would be to take a narrow view of the historical actors who contributed to the development of transdesert transport in the 1920s and 1930s and, just as importantly, those who benefited from it.

Furthermore, the chapter demonstrates that Lebanese, Syrian and Iraqi companies challenged and shaped the ways in which the French and British authorities attempted to organise the transport sector. In doing so, these companies dismantled the prejudice of 'amateurism' that the French and British administrators initially held against them.[16] To speak of 'local companies' is not to deny differences and rivalries between Lebanese, Syrian and Iraqi businesses; rather, the intention is to emphasise that they all had to contend with a regime of incentives that was initially designed to support powerful and predominantly foreign-owned companies. As Jacob Norris has shown in the somewhat different context of Mandate Palestine, the British considered Palestinian Arab entrepreneurs to be unfit to participate in the country's economic development and favoured instead Jewish entrepreneurship.[17] A similar mindset led the French and the British administrators to view Arab entrepreneurs as being incompetent and therefore unable to compete in the transport business, at least initially. Over the years, however, several local companies managed to secure customs exemptions and state subsidies by building on public support and the backing of national governments, exploiting the prevailing Franco–British rivalry and, above all, by positioning themselves as essential to the development of transdesert traffic.

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examples include Lilah Khoja, 'Desert Pullmans', *Mashallah News*, no date. https://mashallahnews.com/routes/the-desert-pullmans/; Sabah al-Nassery, ''Indamā kānat sayyārāt Nairn tanqulu al-musāfirīn 'abra al-bādiya', 19 May 2016 [WordPress Sabah al-al Nassery], https://bit.ly/3rPocZV; Martin Rose, 'Running to Catch the Bus (1)', 24 September 2016 https://martintristramrose.org/2016/09/24/running-to-catch-the-bus-1/; Rachel Cole, 'Crossing the Desert in an Armchair', 14 March 2017. https://sites.northwestern.edu/northwesternlibrary/es/2017/03/14/crossing-the-desert-in-an-armchair/. The philatelist, Rainer Fuchs, has collected documents on a few other transport companies as well: https://fuchs-online.com/overlandmail/Index.htm (accessed 15 April 2022).

[16] For example, see: TNA, FO 684/1/24/14, British Consul Smart to the Foreign Office, Beirut, 17 March 1924.

[17] Jacob Norris, *Land of Progress: Palestine in the Age of Colonial Development, 1905-1948* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). See also Simon Jackson, 'From Beirut to Berlin (via Geneva): The New International History, Middle East Studies and the League of Nations', *Contemporary European History* 27:4 (2018), p. 724.

The structure of the chapter reflects the development of the transdesert transport sector during the interwar period. In the 1920s, all economic activities were concentrated on the Baghdad–Damascus route, where the first two companies—the Nairn and the Eastern—eventually merged into a mainly French and British-owned company under the patronage of the two Mandate powers. At the same time, the rise of local companies transformed the operating conditions of the various entrepreneurs and disrupted the fragile Franco–British compromise reached through the formation of the Nairn Eastern Transport Company. The beginning of the 1930s saw the revival of the proposed Baghdad–Haifa route, which had been supported by the British since the First World War and abandoned for some time due to the unfavourable conditions of the desert terrain between Rutbah and Azraq. The context changed with the emergence of a new and powerful company owned by the Iraqi contractor, Haim Nathaniel, and with the construction by the Iraq Petroleum Company of a rough road running through the volcanic area of the desert during the laying of the Kirkuk–Haifa pipeline. The first concrete step towards initiating the project was taken in 1932, when Haim Nathaniel diverted his postal convoys to the southern route. By rekindling Franco–British tensions and calling into question the joint management of the Baghdad–Damascus route, this episode profoundly affected French, British and Iraqi policies on transdesert transport. In the 1930s, the incentive measures turned into a 'transdesert transport war' which placed the role of local companies in question.

Combining Franco–British Interests

During the first two years of the operation of the transdesert service, the Nairn Transport Company and the Eastern Transport Company were the only companies that caught the attention of the Mandate powers, even though many other entrepreneurs had entered the business, as will become apparent later. For some time, the British prioritised the Nairn Transport Company and its direct route through the desert, and the French looked to the Eastern Transport Company to develop the Palmyra route, while maintaining good relations with the Nairn brothers. Both companies, for their part, sought to get the most out of both sides. Over time, however, the entanglement of Franco–British interests in transdesert traffic convinced the two Mandate powers of the need to overcome rivalry by reaching a compromise. This section traces the developments that led to the merger of the Nairn and Eastern companies in 1926, showing that the transimperial nature of the Baghdad–Damascus route prompted the authorities to combine their interests through the creation of one large transport company. In other words,

the formation of the Nairn Eastern Transport Company reflected Franco–British willingness to transcend rivalries by initiating a form of 'co-imperialism'.[18]

Postal contracts and capital investment

Initially, the French and British authorities did not express the same sympathy for each of the two companies given their strategic imperial considerations. From the outset, the British were keen to support the Nairn Transport Company, which they saw as an accomplishment of the British Empire.[19] British administrators encouraged travellers to opt for this company and never lost an opportunity to criticise the Eastern Transport Company as being unreliable and badly organised. Consul Smart, for example, condemned the Kettaneh brothers for their employment of 'native' drivers, claiming that this was the reason for the occurrence of an accident in 1924. He contended that 'a European organisation [was] essential' to operate transportation across the desert.[20] Overall, the British administrators considered that the Palmyra route could never compete with the direct route and perceived the Nairn Transport Company to be better organised than the Eastern Transport Company.[21] As soon as the Nairn brothers had achieved some success in their explorations, British administrators and the Iraqi Minister of Communications and Public Works, Yasin al-Hashimi, decided to entrust them with the transport of Iraqi mail. The Nairn Transport Company received a contract from the Iraqi government for a period of five years, giving them two rupees per pound of the mail they carried.[22]

The French maintained an ambivalent attitude towards the Nairn Transport Company in the early days of the transdesert service. Because the Nairn brothers were originally from New Zealand and had served in the British army in Palestine, the French regarded their company as

[18] On co-imperialism, see Martin Thomas and Richard Toye (eds.), *Arguing about Empire: Imperial Rhetoric in Britain and France, 1882–1956* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). Guillemette Crouzet sees a similar manifestation of Franco–British co-imperialism in the formation of the Iraq Petroleum Company; see Guillemette Crouzet, 'A Second "Fashoda"? Britain, India, and a French "Threat" in Oman at the End of the Nineteenth Century', in James R. Fichter (ed.), *British and French Colonialism in Africa, Asia and the Middle East: Connected Empires across the Eighteenth to the Twentieth Centuries* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 148–149.
[19] Major D. McCallum, 'The discovery and development of the New Land Route to the East', *Journal of the Central Asian Society* 12:1 (1925), p. 56; See also TNA, FO 371/9013, British Consul Palmer to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Damascus, 4 May 1923.
[20] TNA, FO 684/1/24/14, British Consul Smart to the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Beirut, 2 January 1924.
[21] TNA, FO 684/1/24/14, Memorandum by the Department of Overseas Trade, London, 1 February 1924.
[22] TNA, FO 371/9013, British Consul Palmer to the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Damascus, 14 June 1923; managing director of The Near East to the Air Ministry, London, 26 July 1923; TNA, FO 371/10092, Nairn Transport Company to the Department of Overseas Trade, Beirut, 27 January 1924; CADC, 48CPCOM42, 'Extrait d'un rapport d'un agent commercial français', attached to a letter from the Director of the Beirut Commercial Office, Beirut, 5 December 1923; Note from the French military attaché in Tehran and Kabul, Bombay, 7 November 1923.

a British imperial enterprise. However, they had an interest in encouraging what appeared to be the best organised company in order to promote transdesert traffic. In this context, supporting the Nairn Transport Company was the most effective way for the French to gain a hold on it. The Inspector General of Posts and Telegraphs of Syria and Lebanon granted the company a concession for the transport of Syrian and Lebanese mail between Beirut, Damascus and Baghdad, which came into force shortly after the signing of a contract on 20 December 1923.[23] At the same time, the French welcomed the opening of the Palmyra route and the establishment of the Eastern Transport Company as an alternative to the Nairn Transport Company, which they perceived as being too British for their taste.[24] The Kettaneh brothers' cars passed closer to the French military posts and attracted travellers to Palmyra, which the French hoped to turn into a tourist site.[25] Meanwhile, after much persuasion and with the help of the French Minister in Tehran, the Eastern Transport Company succeeded in obtaining a postal contract from the Iranian government.[26] Moreover, on 13 February 1925, the postal administration of Syria and Lebanon entrusted the Eastern Transport Company with the transport of mail between Lebanon, Syria and Iraq in collaboration with the Nairn Transport Company, while giving them an exclusive contract for mail bound for Iran.[27]

On the one hand, the award of postal contracts guaranteed a minimum income for these two transport companies regardless of the number of passengers they carried. On the other hand, the contracts enabled the Mandate states to have some control over the two companies. Yet this was not the only way for the French and British to gain some leverage in the transport sector. As soon as the transdesert transport service proved to be a successful and promising venture, they looked for ways of reorganising the Eastern Transport Company and the Nairn Transport Company using French and British capital, respectively. From the beginning of 1924, the

[23] TNA, FO 684/1/24/14, Draft mail contract attached to a letter from British Consul Smart to the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Beirut, 2 January 1924; MECA, Nairn Transport Company Collection, 'New Mail Service to Baghdad', *Near East*, 29 November 1923; CADC, 48CPCOM42, High Commissioner Weygand to the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, Beirut, 10 January 1924.

[24] CADC, 48CPCOM43, 'Note sur l'affaire Kettaneh (ou B.B.T.A. Eastern Transport Company)', prepared by the General Secretariat of the Economic and Agricultural Services of the High Commission, Beirut, 3 October 1925

[25] CADC, 48CPCOM42, 'Rapport d'ensemble sur les possibilités et l'utilité qu'il y aurait de créer un service français de transports réguliers entre Damas-Bagdad et Téhéran', prepared by the Intelligence Service, Beirut, 5 January 1924; 'Extrait d'un rapport d'un agent commercial français ayant accompli le voyage Beyrouth-Téhéran par Damas et Bagdad en août 1923 et retour en novembre 1923'. On French policy relating to the development of tourism in Lebanon and Syria, see Idir Ouahes, *Syria and Lebanon under the French Mandate: Cultural Imperialism and the Workings of Empire* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018), pp. 65–88.

[26] CADC, 48CPCOM42, Bonzon (Minister of France in Iran) to the High Commissioner Weygand, Tehran, 6 June 1924 and Bonzon to the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, Tehran, 22 March 1925.

[27] CADC, 48CPCOM42, the French Finance Minister to the French Foreign Minister, Paris, 11 September 1924; TNA, FO 684/1/24/14, Hadow (commercial secretary, British Legation, Tehran) to the Foreign Office, Tehran, 9 May 1924; LON, R28/1/4284/51764, 'Rapport à la Société des Nations sur la situation de la Syrie et du Liban' for 1925, p. 107.

French High Commission contemplated the creation of a French company that would bring benefits to national entrepreneurs and investors, while ensuring that traffic would never be diverted away from Syria. The threat of a deflection of traffic to Haifa, outlined in Chapter 1, prompted High Commissioner Weygand to try to arouse the interest of French investors by approaching the directors of various banks and companies, such as the Crédit Foncier d'Algérie et de Tunisie, La Banque de Syrie and the Messageries Maritimes.[28] In the months that followed, different groups contemplated buying out or investing capital in the Eastern Transport Company and the Nairn Transport Company. One of these groups was the Société Générale Française d'Entreprises et de Travaux Publics–Section Orient (SGSO). Created in Paris in early 1924 as a subsidiary of the French parent company, it aimed to invest in various development programmes in Beirut. The French entrepreneur, Louis Garchey, and the Beirut businessman, Alfred Sursock, both prominent figures in the SGSO, entered into negotiations with Norman Nairn, with a view to buying out his company.[29] The French did not welcome the proposal, as they would have preferred the Nairn Transport Company to be taken over by a more powerful French group operating directly from Paris.[30] For its part, the British Department of Overseas Trade was concerned about the Nairn Transport Company 'falling into undesirable hands'. Consul Satow was instructed to act secretly and unofficially to derail the negotiations.[31]

In the end, the takeover of the Nairn Transport Company by the SGSO did not materialise, most likely because of pressure exerted by British officials. Instead, Louis Garchey initiated negotiations with the Kettaneh brothers for the takeover of the Eastern Transport Company by the SGSO. These negotiations were more successful and led to the creation of the Beyrouth–Bagdad–Téhéran Automobiles (BBTA) on 22 September 1924. The BBTA had an initial capital of 750,000 francs, of which 500,000 francs was contributed by the SGSO and 250,000 francs by the Kettaneh brothers. Francis and Alfred Kettaneh sat on the board of directors alongside seven other individuals. The company's capital was later increased through an additional input of 250,000 francs contributed by a British group, leaving the French shares

[28] CADC, 48CPCOM42, High Commissioner Weygand to the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, Beirut, 10 January 1924; 'Rapport d'ensemble sur les possibilités et l'utilité qu'il y aurait de créer un service français de transports réguliers entre Damas, Bagdad et Téhéran', prepared by the Intelligence Service, Beirut, 5 January 1924.
[29] I am deeply indebted to Cyrus Schayegh for informing me of Alfred Sursock's role in the SGSO and for sharing some documents on the dealings between Alfred Sursock, Norman Nairn and the French High Commission. See the Sursock Archives, the Phoenix Center for Lebanese Studies, Université de Saint Esprit, Kaslik, Lebanon [hereinafter: SA/PCLS]. 'Transport Nairn', document No. 7010; SA/PCLS, High Commissioner Weygand to Alfred Sursock, Beirut, 6 April 1924, document No 6823.
[30] CADC, 48CPCOM42, High Commissioner Weygand to the French Foreign Minister, Beirut, 16 April 1924.
[31] TNA, FO 684/1/24/14, British Consul Satow to Foreign Office, Beirut, 22 February 1924; TNA, FO 371/10092, Memorandum by the Department of Overseas Trade, London, 25 March 1924.

still dominant.[32] The structure of the new company satisfied the French, who had insisted that at least two-thirds of the shares remain in the hands of Lebanese, Syrian and French investors. Its registration in Lebanon, and the location of its administrative headquarters in Paris, also gave it a French appearance.[33]

To a certain extent, the establishment of the BBTA also suited the British. In the previous months, British consular officials had become increasingly interested in the Eastern Transport Company. In May 1924, Consul Smart reported that the company had greatly improved its service and that the importance of the Palmyra route now seemed assured in the long term.[34] Considering that to 'persist in boycotting this Palmyra route' was not a wise strategy from the standpoint of British interests, he urged the British to reconsider their position on the Eastern Transport Company and recommended that British capitalists invest in the company to make it more British.[35] In his view, the association of British capital with the Eastern Transport Company was not only profitable but also unavoidable:

> […] we should contemplate with equanimity the probability that we shall be unable to enjoy a monopoly of this trans-desert traffic, by the NAIRN or the PALMYRA routes. At present no routes avoiding Syria appears to be within the range of practicalities. We can hardly hope to exclude French participation in such routes traversing their Mandated territory. Franco-British participation would seem to be both equitable and inevitable. It would also seem desirable in the interest of Anglo-French harmony, which would be advantageous both practically and economically in these parts.[36]

While the development of a transdesert route had initially brought the French and the British into competition over the same desert space, the transimperial nature of the Baghdad–Damascus route became an argument in favour of cooperation, or at least in favour of a common objective: that of founding a company with combined French and British capital.[37] The formation of the BBTA was a first move in this direction.

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[32] CADC, 48CPCOM43, 'Note sur l'affaire Kettaneh (ou B.B.T.A. Eastern Transport Company)', prepared by the General Secretariat of the Economic and Agricultural Services of the High Commission, 3 October 1925; CADC, 50CPCOM588, French Memo on the Nairn Eastern Transport Company, author unknown, 26 June 1931.
[33] Ibid. See also CADC, 48CPCOM42, the French Finance Minister to the Foreign Minister, Paris, 11 September 1924.
[34] TNA, FO 684/1/24/14, British Consul Smart to the Foreign Office, Damascus, 17 March 1924.
[35] TNA, FO 684/1/24/14, Smart to the Foreign Office, Damascus, 20 May 1924.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Apart from Consul Smart, other French and British officials spoke out in favour of the creation of a Franco-British company around the same time. CADC, 48CPCOM42, telegram from the Minister of Foreign Affairs to High Commissioner Weygand, Paris, 22 January 1924; TNA, AIR 5/408, Oliphant (Foreign Office) to the Colonial Office, London, 21 October 1925.

The Kettaneh playing every angle

Despite appearances, the BBTA was not solely the result of French and British imperial ambitions and accommodations. A closer look at the negotiations leading up to its creation reveals the role played by the Kettaneh brothers. Immediately after creating the Eastern Transport Company, the Kettaneh family began to play both sides carefully, taking advantage of a context in which pre-existing 'flexible imaginings of national identity' had not yet given way to distinctly 'separate nationalities'.[38] Specifically, they presented themselves differently depending on the situation, sometimes as Syrians (and therefore as French subjects) and sometimes as Palestinians by virtue of their family origins (and therefore as British subjects). They maintained this ambiguity about their nationality, and that of their company, in order to gain support from all sides.

When seeking a postal contract from the Iranian government, Alfred Kettaneh presented himself as a French subject because in his view, the Iranian government was more willing to negotiate with the French than with the British. He even managed to obtain a certificate that presented him as a French protégé. Not being naturalised, this certificate helped him to gain favours from the Tehran government.[39] Meanwhile, the Kettaneh brothers became increasingly aware that they needed to gain British support for their company. Francis Kettaneh made it very clear during his visit with British Consul Smart in May 1924 that he intended to capitalise his business in London. He explained that his company depended mainly on British travellers and that French capital alone was not sufficient for its survival. Claiming to be a Palestinian, Francis Kettaneh requested British assistance.[40] In the weeks that followed, he began negotiations with British investors and in June 1924, he travelled to London to formalise the creation of a British sister company of the Eastern Transport Company. The Kettaneh brothers opened negotiations with British investors at around the same time as they were negotiating with the French and the SGSO.[41]

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[38] Lauren Banko, 'Claiming Identities in Palestine: Migration and Nationality under the Mandate', *Journal of Palestine Studies* 46:2 (2018), pp. 26–43. See also Lauren Banko, *The Invention of Palestinian Citizenship, 1918–1947* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

[39] CADC, 48CPCOM42, the Minister of France in Iran to the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, Tehran, 22 March 1925.

[40] TNA, FO 684/1/24/14, British Consul Smart to the Foreign Office, Damascus, 20 May 1924; CADC, 48CPCOM43, the Eastern Transport Company (BBTA) to Lépissier (Secretary General of the High Commission), Beirut, 9 November 1925.

[41] CADC, 48CPCOM42, the Minister of France in Iran to High Commissioner Weygand, Tehran, 6 June 1924; CADC, 48CPCOM43, 'Note sur l'affaire Kettaneh (ou B.B.T.A. Eastern Transport Company)', prepared by the General Secretariat of the Economic and Agricultural Services of the High Commission, Beirut, 3 October 1925.

For entrepreneurs like Francis and Alfred Kettaneh, associating their company with foreign capital was not only a way to obtain widespread support; it was also a way to avoid the creation of companies with purely French or British capital that would be competitors. The agreement between the Eastern Transport Company and the SGSO stemmed in part from this concern, as the Kettaneh brothers feared that French investors would start operating a competing transport service on the Palmyra route. It is equally true that the French put strong pressure on the brothers to reach an agreement with the SGSO. According to Francis Kettaneh, the French High Commission even threatened to ban his company from operating in Syrian territory. But the efforts of the Kettaneh brothers bore some fruit. During the negotiations, Francis Kettaneh insisted that British capital be associated with the BBTA.[42] He achieved some success in January 1925, when a British group increased the BBTA's capital through a contribution of 250,000 francs, as mentioned above.

The merger of the Eastern and the Nairn companies

The newly created BBTA did not last long. By mid-1925, the company was in dire financial straits, prompting some stakeholders to consider a merger with the Nairn Transport Company. Initially, High Commissioner Sarrail resolutely opposed any change in the balance between British minority capital and French majority capital invested in the BBTA.[43] However, in the following months, the situation worsened further. In October 1925, the French High Commission's economic department wrote a severely critical note on the management of the BBTA. After reviewing the various benefits granted to the company—an annual subsidy of 100,000 francs from the Syrian and Lebanese governments; a subvention for the construction of a hotel in Palmyra; customs exemptions on equipment, oil and fuel; and a concession for the transport of mail between Beirut, Baghdad and Tehran—the report addressed the many shortcomings and failures of the company. These included the lack of regularity in departures, deficient equipment, delays in the delivery of mail to Tehran, lack of technical staff and excess administrative staff. The company was now saddled with massive debts.[44] As the British consul in Beirut stated in November 1925, 'Mr. Kettaneh appear[ed] to have fallen completely from French grace.'[45]

[42] FO 684/1/24/14, Hadow (British Legation) to the Department of Overseas Trade, Tehran, 31 July 1924; TNA, FO371/10093, British Consul Satow to the Department of Overseas Trade, Beirut, 19 August 1924.
[43] CADC, 48CPCOM42, High Commissioner Sarrail to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Beirut, 18 April 1925.
[44] CADC, 48CPCOM43, 'Note sur l'affaire Kettaneh (ou B.B.T.A. Eastern Transport Company)', prepared by the General Secretariat of the Economic and Agricultural Services of the High Commission, Beirut, 3 October 1925.
[45] TNA, FO 371/10831, Acting British Consul Mayers to the Foreign Office, Beirut, 9 November 1925.

At this point, British capitalists entered into negotiations with French investors willing to buy shares in the proposed company that would result from the merger of the Nairn and the BBTA companies. Simultaneously, Albert Stern and General Mance, both British businessmen, discussed with the French administration the transfer of the benefits enjoyed by the BBTA to the new company. In January 1926, French High Commissioner, Henry de Jouvenel, promised customs exemptions, government subsidies and a concession for the transport of mail. By May 1926, the BBTA had almost ceased to operate.[46] The merger finally took place on 21 September 1926, and the new company was registered in Cyprus as the Nairn Eastern Transport Company. The board of directors was composed of eight individuals who equally represented two respective groups of French and British shareholders. On the British side, these shareholders were the Ottoman Bank (represented by General Mance), the Stern Brothers, the Imperial Bank of Persia and the Anglo-Persian Oil Company. On the French side, the shareholders were La Banque de Paris et des Pays-Bas, La Banque Ottomane, Le Crédit Foncier d'Algérie et de Tunisie and the Messageries Maritimes. At the first Board meeting held in Paris on 27 September, Norman Nairn was appointed as the managing director of the new company.[47] As for the Kettaneh brothers, they withdrew from the passenger transport business and devoted themselves fully to the trade of goods and vehicles and the execution of public works.

The creation of the Nairn Eastern Transport Company was the culmination of prolonged efforts by French and British officials and investors to assert their interests in the business of transdesert transport. After three years of being in operation, the two companies on which the Mandate authorities had relied to create a burgeoning flow across the desert now formed one large company, in which 'England and France had pooled their interest'.[48] In a report submitted to the Colonial Office on the creation of the Nairn Eastern Transport Company, Albert Stern wrote that 'A purely British Company would have been preferred, but in the opinion of Mr.

[46] TNA, FO 371/10831, Roudy (Banque de Paris et des Pays Bas) to Albert Stern, Paris, 28 October 1925; TNA, FO 371/11466, Acting British Consul Mayers to the Department of Overseas Trade, Beirut, 24 December 1925, High Commissioner de Jouvenel to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Beirut, 16 January 1926; extract from Economic Report No. 56, 7 June 1926; CADC, 48CPCOM43, the French Minister of Foreign Affairs to the High Commissioner for Syria and Lebanon, Paris, 13 January 1926.

[47] CADC, 48CPCOM43, Roudy (director, Nairn Eastern Transport Company) to the High Commissioner for Syria and Lebanon, place unknown, 30 September 1926; TNA, FO 371/12269, Memorandum from Albert Stern attached to a letter from Sir J. Shuckburgh (Colonial Office) to Oliphant, London, 24 May 1927. See also Christina Phelps Grant, *The Syrian Desert*, pp. 279–281; John Munro, *The Nairn Way*, pp. 74–75. Christina P. Grant and John Munro see the bankruptcy of the BBTA and its takeover by the Nairn brothers and a group of French and British shareholders as a sign of the success of the former, pointing to their commitment to reducing operating costs, their exemplary organisation, the punctuality and competence of their drivers, and so on. However, they fail to examine the relationship of dependence and mutual influence between transport companies, foreign investors and Mandate powers.

[48] Morton B. Stratton, 'British Railways and Motor Roads in the Middle East, 1918–1930', *Economic Geography* 20:2 (1944), p. 126.

Norman Nairn the Amman route was too costly and the only commercial route lay through Syria.'[49] Echoing Consul Smart's opinion expressed a few months earlier, Albert Stern noted the inevitability of Franco–British cooperation, as the route passed through both of their mandated territories. The creation of the Nairn Eastern Transport Company was the result of a growing awareness that Franco–British cooperation was necessary to secure imperial interests on both sides. As a member of the Department of Overseas Trade later stated, the creation of the Nairn Eastern Transport Company was aimed at 'overcoming Anglo–French friction'.[50]

Local Companies on the Rise

The transdesert transport sector was by no means limited to the two companies that merged in 1926. Many self-employed drivers and small transport companies also ventured into this promising business from its outset. Over time, Lebanese, Syrian and Iraqi companies accounted for an increasing share of the transdesert traffic. This section traces the growing importance of local companies in the transdesert transport business, exploring how they contested the foreign-funded Nairn Eastern Transport Company's stranglehold on the sector and challenged the arrangement of the Mandate powers, entailing the establishment of a Franco–British company that would control all traffic.

Lebanese companies: Kawatly, Tawil & Co. and Makhzumi & Co.

A French economic memorandum written in March 1925 indicated that the Nairn and the Eastern companies together accounted for about 40% of the traffic, while 30% was handled by independent drivers and 25% by small companies.[51] In the years that followed, these companies ceased operations; however, other Lebanese, Syrian and Iraqi entrepreneurs developed regular transport services between Beirut, Damascus and Baghdad for varying periods of time.[52] Of these companies, the Lebanese Kawatly, Tawil & Co. and Makhzumi &

[49] TNA, FO 371/12269, Memorandum from Albert Stern, attached to a letter from Sir J. Shuckburgh (the Colonial Office) to Mr. Oliphant, London, 24 May 1927.
[50] TNA, FO 371/13745, Picton Bagge (Department of Overseas Trade) to Sir J. Shuckburgh, London, 18 March 1929. A similar position was expressed in a French report: CADC, 48CPCOM43, 'Note sur l'affaire Kettaneh (ou B.B.T.A. Eastern Transport Company)', prepared by the General Secretariat of the Economic and Agricultural Services of the High Commission, Beirut, 3 October 1925. Likewise, one of the shareholders of the Nairn Eastern Transport Company, Harry Osborne Mance, later said: 'This measure [i.e., the merger] eliminated the danger of Anglo-French rivalry on the Syrian route, which was then the only commercial route to Iraq […].': Osborne Mance, *International Road Transport: Postal, Electricity and Miscellaneous Questions* (London: Oxford University Press, 1947), p. 48.
[51] CADN, 1SL/1/V/702, Memorandum by Dentz (Head of the French Intelligence Service), Beirut, 6 March 1925.
[52] NARA, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Asia, 1910-1929, microfilm roll 16, File 890d.79790d, US Consul Knabenshue, Beirut to the American Express Company, Hamburg, 15 March 1927; LON, R981/12B/49676/61055, the Ministry of Interior, Baghdad, to *Conseil sanitaire*

Co. were the two most important ones up to 1928. Founded in 1923, Kawatly, Tawil & Co. was headquartered in Beirut with a branch located in Baghdad. In its heyday, the company used a dozen seven-seater cars, a few trucks and a charabanc with seating for 24 passengers to transport people and goods between Lebanon, Syria and Iraq.[53] The two companies widely advertised their services in the local press, which in turn supported them. Kawatly, Tawil & Co. advertised a comfortable transport service with a 'national' company in *Al-Ma'rad*.[54] The Damascus newspaper *Al-Sha'b* featured advertisements for Makhzumi & Co. in almost all of its issues published between July 1927 and March 1928.[55] *Lisan al-Hal* published various articles congratulating Kawatly, Tawil & Co. on their results.[56] On 16 August 1927, *Al-Sha'b* issued an article on 'The development of national companies' (*Taqaddum al-sharikāt al-waṭaniyya*), which fully supported Kawatly, Tawil & Co. The newspaper claimed that they had been one of the first companies to consider operating across the desert and had made impressive progress in just a few years since 1923. According to *Al-Sha'b*, the achievement of Kawatly, Tawil & Co. belied the authorities' belief that local businesses failed to thrive.[57]

Encouraged by their success, the two Lebanese companies requested the same privileges as the Nairn Transport Company. In June 1926, Kawatly, Tawil & Co. approached the French High Commission to ask for a customs exemption on its vehicles and equipment as well as support to obtain a financial subsidy from the Lebanese and Syrian governments. The company stressed its important role in maintaining transdesert traffic and in developing trade relations between Syria and Iraq, while insisting that it also helped to 'propagate French influence'.[58] At first, the Acting High Commissioner refused to take a decision, although he considered Kawatly, Tawil & Co. to be 'an interesting local initiative' and preferred to await the outcome of the ongoing negotiations on the merger of the Nairn and Eastern companies.[59] He sought the opinion of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, whose answer was categorical. In a telegram, the Foreign Minister stated that arrangements had already been made with the newly created Franco–British company, so there was 'no reason to enter into talks with a competing

maritime et sanitaire, Cairo, 18 August 1927; TNA, FO 684/7/34/3, Memorandum on transdesert traffic by Frank H. Todd, enclosed in a letter from British Consul Mackereth to the British Consul in Baghdad, Damascus, 26 April 1934; Raoul Blanchard, 'La route du désert de Syrie', *Annales de Géographie* 34:189 (1925), p. 236.

[53] CADC, 48CPCOM43, Kawatly, Tawil & Co. to the Acting French High Commissioner, Beirut, 17 June 1926.

[54] Institut français du Proche-Orient [IFPO], *Al-Ma'rad* (Vol. 2), No. 15, January–April 1926, p. 24.

[55] See, for example, *Al-Sha'b*, of 1 July 1927.

[56] Global Press Archive, 'ḥarakat al-suyyāḥ', *Lisan al-Hal*, 9 April 1927, p. 2, as well as 'Irtifā' as'ār al-thulj', *Lisan al-Hal*, 4 June 1927, p. 4. https://gpa.eastview.com/crl/mena (accessed 4 March 2022).

[57] AUB, 'Taqaddum al-sharikāt al-waṭaniyya', *al-Sha'b*, 16 August 1927, p. 2.

[58] CADC, 48CPCOM43, Kawatly, Tawil & Co. to the Acting French High Commissioner, Beirut, 17 June 1926.

[59] CADC, 48CPCOM43, the Acting French High Commissioner to the French Foreign Minister, Beirut, 3 July 1926.

company'.[60] Nonetheless, whereas senior officials in France refused to support multiple companies that would create harmful competition, the French authorities in Beirut were more inclined to back Kawatly, Tawil & Co. and Makhzumi & Co.

The role of these companies during the Great Syrian Revolt had much to do with French support. As seen in the previous chapter, the Syrian uprising profoundly affected transdesert transport. After suffering several attacks on its convoys, the Nairn Transport Company was forced to divert its cars to the Amman route in September 1925 and ceased its operations across Syria for a period of about eight months. During this period, Kawatly Tawil & Co. and Makhzumi & Co. took advantage of the situation and offered their services to the French High Commission. In particular, they carried the diplomatic mail between Lebanon, Syria and Iraq and transported French officials free of charge.[61] The French maintained their collaboration with the two companies throughout the revolt, frequently entrusting them with the transport of mail, sometimes in conjunction with the Nairn service on the southern route.[62] The rise of these Lebanese companies in the domain of transdesert transport had effectively changed the relationship between the French authorities and the Nairn Eastern Transport Company.

In February 1927, the latter's director in Paris recalled that Henry de Jouvenel, the former High Commissioner, had made promises to them during the negotiations that led to the merger of the Eastern and Nairn companies. These promises included exemption from customs duties on vehicles, oils and spare parts, two subsidies of 100,000 francs respectively from the Syrian and Lebanese governments and exemption from traffic taxes and petrol duties. The director of the Nairn Eastern Transport Company reiterated the company's goal of establishing regular connections between Beirut and Baghdad but stated that to do so would require the 'benevolent input' of the High Commission.[63] The French were very reluctant to meet their demands, as evidenced by a letter sent by the Acting High Commissioner to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He noted that the Nairn Eastern Transport Company had shown no signs of French influence since the merger and was even evidencing an increasingly British orientation. Passengers on the Nairn Eastern service did not feel that they were travelling with a partially French company.

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[60] CADC, 48CPCOM43, Telegram from the French Foreign Minister to the Acting French High Commissioner, Paris, 19 July 1926.
[61] CADC, 48CPCOM43, Kawatly, Tawil & Co. to the Acting French High Commissioner, Beirut, 17 June 1926.
[62] AUB, advertising for Makhzumi in *al-Sha'b*, 1 July 1927, p. 4 and 'Barīd Baghdād', *al-Sha'b*, 16 October 1927, p. 3; TNA, FO 371/12269, Extract from Iraq Economic Report No. 73, 6 January 1927.
[63] CADC 48CPCOM43, Annex to a letter from Roudy (director, Nairn Eastern Transport Company) to the High Commissioner for Syria and Lebanon, place unknown, 30 September 1926; Nairn Eastern Transport Company to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Paris, 5 February 1927.

> Le voyageur qui veut, de Beyrouth, partir à Bagdad par la Société Nairn, s'adresse à une agence ayant une étiquette anglaise et un personnel anglais ; on n'y parle que l'anglais ; c'est un Directeur anglais qui donne les ordres ; la voiture est américaine et porte des inscriptions anglaises, et c'est sous le drapeau anglais que l'on voyage, après avoir payé sa place en monnaie anglaise.[64]

And yet, he continued, the French kept granting them certain advantages such as the postal contract and customs exemptions. Furthermore, he noted that the Lebanese companies, Kawatly, Tawil & Co. and Makhzumi & Co. were now carrying a much larger volume of passengers and goods than the Nairn Eastern Transport Company and that their convoys were departing more frequently. In addition, these companies travelled 'under the French flag', provided free transport for officials on duty and conveyed government mail. He concluded by stating that the other advantages claimed by the Nairn Eastern Transport Company would not be granted unless the company appointed a French director in Beirut, translated its name and advertisements into French and used French equipment.[65] The Nairn Eastern Transport Company accepted some of the requests, but refused to appoint a French director in Beirut. In their view, replacing Norman Nairn with another person would cause too much damage to the company and even undermine its existence.[66]

Customs exemptions and subsidies

A few months later, the High Commissioner passed a decree granting customs exemptions to some transdesert transport companies. Given the success of the two Lebanese businesses, the French decided to include them in the scope of the new legislation. Issued on 8 October 1927, Decree 1607 granted the Nairn Eastern Transport Company, Kawatly, Tawil & Co. and Makhzumi & Co. exemptions from customs duties on the vehicles, tyres, fuel, lubricating oils and spare parts that they used.[67] The inclusion of the Lebanese companies raised

[64] CADC, 48CPCOM43, the Acting French High Commissioner to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Beirut, 26 March 1927. Translation: 'The traveller who wants to leave Beirut for Baghdad with the Nairn Company goes through an agency with British etiquette and British staff; only English is spoken; it is a British director who gives the orders; the car is American and bears English inscriptions, and it is under the British flag that one travels, after having paid for one's seat in British currency.'

[65] Ibid. See also CADN, 1SL/1/V/702, 'Route Beyrouth-Bagdad-Teheran', date unknown. This note, undated but certainly written in 1927–1928, compared the services offered by the Nairn Eastern and Kawatly, Tawil & Co. companies. It stated that Kawatly, Tawil & Co. offered a totally free service for the transport of officials between Beirut and Bagdad, whereas the Nairn Eastern Company charged for food. The note's conclusion was that Kawatly, Tawil & Co. should therefore be used on this route.

[66] CADC, 48CPCOM43, note by Maugras (Banque de Paris et des Pays Bas), Paris, 25 April 1927.

[67] Decree 1608, *Bulletin mensuel des actes administratifs du Haut-Commissariat* https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k64598233/f2.item.r=1607%20transd%C3%A9sertiques (accessed 4 March 2022).

objections from the Nairn Eastern Transport Company. In a letter to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs dated 17 November 1927, one of the French directors of the company, A. Roudy, stated that Henry de Jouvenel's promises had been made only to them. Furthermore, he recalled that not all of the promises had been fulfilled to date:

> M. de Jouvenel avait bien voulu nous promettre, et M. Ponsot nous avait confirmé, l'octroi de certains avantages qui, à défaut d'un monopole qui eût été illicite, devaient nous assurer une situation privilégiée vis-à-vis de nos concurrents.[68]

As a result, High Commissioner Ponsot was asked to explain why he had granted the benefits laid out in Decree 1607 to Lebanese companies. After recalling the services rendered by Kawatly Tawil & Co. and Makhzumi & Co. during the Great Syrian Revolt, Ponsot explained to the Foreign Ministry that he could not force local governments to consent to support only foreign companies.[69] In fact, the issue was not so much about the customs exemptions of Decree 1607; rather, the main concern was a project granting financial subsidies that was under discussion. In a subsequent letter, High Commissioner Ponsot explained that the promises made by his predecessor were of two different types. Firstly, there were advantages that were offered entirely at his discretion, such as postal concessions and customs exemptions. In this regard, he maintained that the Nairn Eastern Transport Company was already benefiting from customs exemptions and that in practice, it was the only company to enjoy the benefits of Decree 1607. Of the other companies, one (Kawatly, Tawil & Co.) was in receivership, another (a French company) was not yet firmly established, and the last (Makhzumi & Co.) was small and could not be 'a serious rival'.[70] Secondly, Ponsot maintained that the consent of local governments was necessary for the provision of financial grants. Yet the Lebanese government refused to give a subsidy to a foreign company if local companies were providing similar services, and the Syrian government was not in a position to provide financial support. Ponsot further noted that the president of the Lebanese Republic had just published a decree granting the Nairn Eastern Transport Company a subsidy of 45,000 francs for the year 1927, and the government was planning a budget of 100,000 francs for the year 1928 to be distributed among the main companies operating across the desert. He concluded that although the Nairn Eastern

[68] CADC, 48CPCOM43, Roudy (Nairn Eastern Transport Company) to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Paris, 17 November 1927. Translation: 'Mr de Jouvenel had promised us, and Mr Ponsot had confirmed, the granting of certain advantages, which in the absence of a monopoly which would have been illicit, would have ensured us a privileged situation vis-à-vis our competitors.'
[69] CADC, 48CPCOM43, High Commissioner Ponsot to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Beirut, 28 June 1927.
[70] CADC, 48CPCOM43, High Commissioner Ponsot to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Beirut, 19 February 1928.

Transport Company could not 'obtain a *de jure* monopoly, it [could] manage to enjoy a *de facto* monopoly'.[71]

Between 1927 and 1930, the Nairn Eastern Transport Company received an average annual subsidy of 50,000 francs instead of the 100,000 francs promised by de Jouvenel, which nonetheless was of great help to the company.[72] In 1927, Kawatly, Tawil & Co. submitted a petition to the Lebanese government asking for the same financial support. This petition was discussed at an extraordinary session of the government held on 8 February 1928.[73] However, in the interim, the company fell into serious economic difficulties and went into liquidation, as declared by a court in Beirut. Kawatly, Tawil & Co. was allowed to continue its operations under the control of the liquidator, but in September 1928, Iraqi creditors demanded full repayment of their claims and seized the company's vehicles.[74] Although the reasons for its failure remain unclear, Kawatly, Tawil & Co. did go bankrupt by the end of 1928. Its equipment was bought by a French entrepreneur, Baron de Neufville, who would also try his luck in the business of transdesert traffic.[75]

Syrian and Iraqi companies gain momentum

Between the late 1920s and the early 1930s, the commercial landscape of transdesert transport underwent major changes, as several companies went bankrupt and many new ones emerged. By the end of 1929, the Nairn Eastern Transport Company was still running a regular service between Beirut and Baghdad, using four six-wheelers and four lorries. In addition, three young Syrian companies were offering a regular transport service plying the same route. Several associates ran the National Company, which owned five passenger cars. Adib Sha'ban operated a passenger service with nineteen touring cars between Beirut and Baghdad. Finally, Mahmud al-Debosh and Rashid Muhyi al-Din Akkash ran a company with eighteen touring

[71] Ibid. Original French: 'Impuissante à obtenir un monopole de droit, elle peut arriver à jouir en réalité de ce monopole.'
[72] CADC, 50CPCOM588, French note on the Nairn Eastern Transport Company, author unknown, 26 June 1931; CADN, 1SL/1/V/703, Note from the political cabinet of the High Commission, Beirut, 8 September 1934, p. 6.
[73] See the agenda of the extraordinary session of the Lebanese Parliament of 8 February 1928, item 3.3: http://www.legallaw.ul.edu.lb/parliament/P1/1928/P28E12/000.HTM (accessed 4 March 2022).
[74] CADN, 1SL/1/V/702, 'Liquidation de la Maison Kawatly Tawil', French Intelligence Information No. 1036/T, 19 December 1927; French Consul Maigret to the French High Commissioner, Baghdad, 28 December 1927; Kawatly, Tawil & Co. to the Secretary General of the French High Commission, Beirut, 13 September 1928.
[75] TNA, FO 371/12269, British Consul Satow to the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Beirut, 31 October 1927 and 19 November 1927; CADC, 50CPCOM358, the French High Commissioner to the French Minister for Foreign Affairs, Beirut, 17 December 1927. See also Christina Phelps Grant, *The Syrian Desert*, p. 228.

cars and eight lorries and placed numerous advertisements in the Syrian and Lebanese press. Founded in 1926, Debosh & Akkash was the oldest of the major Syrian companies.[76]

In 1929, the three Syrian companies and the Nairn Eastern Transport Company handled all passenger traffic between Baghdad and Damascus, as revealed by the statistics compiled by the French authorities. These figures (Table 1) give details of the volumes of passengers and goods transported by each company operating on the Damascus–Baghdad route.[77] Together, the above-mentioned four companies conveyed 96.8% of passenger traffic in both directions, distributed as follows: Nairn Eastern Transport Company: 17.7%, Shaban Transport Co.: 32%, Debosh & Akkash: 28.2% and National Co.: 18.9%. Thus, the three Syrian companies together handled two-thirds of the passenger traffic. In terms of freight traffic, the share of these four companies was much lower (37.3%) and was mainly attributable to Debosh & Akkash (16.8%) and Shaban Transport Co. (13.3%). Three other companies stood out in relation to this type of traffic: an Iraqi company run by Haim Nathaniel (23%) and two Lebanese companies engaged primarily in transit trade. The first one was managed by Michel Gemayel (20%) and the second one by the Kettaneh brothers (12.5%). The late 1920s thus witnessed the emergence of various Syrian and Iraqi companies after a first generation that mainly comprised Lebanese companies.

The statistics for 1930 (Table 2) show an almost identical distribution to that of 1929, with the same four companies handling almost all the passenger traffic.[78] That year, Debosh & Akkash handled 23.1% of the passenger traffic and 12.7% of the freight traffic, while Shaban Transport Co. handled 27% of the passenger traffic and 9.4% of the freight traffic.[79] By contrast, the statistics for 1931 (Table 3) reveal certain changes in the transdesert transport sector. That year, three more companies catered to passenger traffic: Daniel Iskandar, Haim Nathaniel and Sawaf & Seyada. The total number of passengers transported across the desert dropped from 15,700 to 11,875 and was divided among seven companies instead of four. By contrast, freight traffic increased in 1931 by almost 180% compared with this type of traffic during the previous

[76] TNA, CO 732/39/11, extract from the Economic Report for the fortnight ending 13 December 1929. For advertisements broadcast by Debosh & Akkash, see, for example, AUB, *al-Sha'b*, 18 March 1928, p. 3 and 4 October 1928, p. 4; *Le Commerce du Levant*, 15 November 1929, p. 3.

[77] For statistics on transdesert traffic for 1929, see CADN, 1SL/1/V/842, Annex No. 2 to the Annual Report of the *Sûreté Générale et Police des Etats* for 1929. The British statistics show very similar figures to the French ones for the years considered here, but they do not give details by company: TNA, FO 684/7/34/3, statistics on transdesert traffic for the years 1927 to 1933, attached to a letter from British Consul Mackereth to the British consul in Baghdad, Damascus, 26 April 1934.

[78] Note, however, that for a reason that is unclear, the figures for the National and for Haim Nathaniel were combined on the same line, which makes it difficult to compare them with the figures recorded for 1929.

[79] For statistics on transdesert traffic in 1930 and 1931, see CADN, 1SL/1/V/703, 'Routes transdésertiques Damas-Bagdad: Statistiques des convois transdésertiques pour les années 1930-1931'. Note that the statistics for 1930 included the traffic in northern Syria (probably along the Aleppo–Deir ez-Zor–Mosul route). These data have not been reproduced in Table 2.

year and was overwhelmingly controlled by Haim Nathaniel (57.2%) and Daniel Iskandar (25.3%).[80]

TABLE 1: TRANSDESERT TRAFFIC IN 1929

	Damascus to Baghdad		**Baghdad to Damascus**	
	Passengers	Goods (kg.)	Passengers	Goods (kg.)
Nairn	1,207	22,710	1,123	50,210
Debosh & Akkash	2,615	199,870	1,852	172,430
National	1,693	53,310	1,298	32,580
Shaban	2,674	182,954	2,395	110,228
Nathaniel	26	213,728	26	294,324
Kettaneh	30	276,317	–	–
Makhzumi	259	44,584	196	50,168
Huwaidi	81	3,800	–	–
Agapoff	137	12,450	224	50,635
Gemayel	4	380,319	–	60,950
Saad	–	–	4	–
Nash agent	–	–	2	–
Total	8,726	1,390,042	7,120	821,525

TABLE 2: TRANSDESERT TRAFFIC IN 1930

	Damascus to Baghdad			**Baghdad to Damascus**		
	Cars	Passengers	Goods (kg.)	Cars	Passengers	Goods (kg.)
Nairn	252	1480	79,306	180	1,302	45,087
Debosh & Akkash	402	2050	101,115	353	1,597	171,731
Shaban	418	2381	74,388	406	1,887	126,983
National & Nathaniel	535	2079	592,901	578	2,254	669,688
Hoss	56	322	2,893	64	356	8,525
Kettaneh	158	13	131,493	–	–	–
Saad	47	15	75,721	–	–	–
Miscellaneous	81	26	61,888	18	38	2,353
Total	1,949	8,366	1,119,705	1,599	7,434	1,024,367

[80] Ibid.

TABLE 3: TRANSDESERT TRAFFIC IN 1931

	Damascus to Baghdad			Baghdad to Damascus		
	Cars	Passengers	Goods (kg.)	Cars	Passengers	Goods (kg.)
Nairn	193	848	73,735	184	955	79,000
Debosh & Akkash	230	985	22,605	228	1,023	31,067
Shaban	241	972	72,501	259	1,148	109,965
National	183	723	42,000	150	704	31,950
Nathaniel	418	523	1,070,400	403	856	1,125,750
Iskandar	359	870	529,500	334	958	451,800
Sawaf & Seyada	148	611	66,500	159	681	61,096
Kettaneh	34	11	44,500	3	3	7,000
Saad	12	4	–	1	–	3,000
Total	1,818	5,547	1,921,741	1,721	6,328	1,920,628

The multiplication and growth of local companies during the first decade of transdesert traffic operations demonstrates the key role of Arab entrepreneurs in the development of commercial motorised transport between the Mandate states. To be sure, the expansion of this sector enabled the movement of an increasing number of people across the desert, as has been sketched so far and will be discussed in more detail in Part II of this dissertation. But the development of the Baghdad–Damascus route also enabled many Arab entrepreneurs and their families to make a living from this promising, if not profitable, business. In the 1930s, local companies would challenge the existing regime of incentives for selected transport companies. Before examining this development, the next section explores the interactions among and mutual influence of the transport entrepreneurs themselves. The multiplication of transport companies between the mid-1920s and the early 1930s was accompanied by increased competition that posed a formidable challenge to the various entrepreneurs. To stand out from the crowd, some companies opted for cheap transport to win new customers. Others chose to specialise in a specific type of transport. Overall, increased competition led to a continuous decrease in the transport fares charged for the journey between Beirut and Baghdad.

Competition and Specialisation

Cutting transport fares

In the early days of the transdesert service, the Nairn Transport Company charged £30 for a single trip between Beirut and Baghdad and carried 60 lb (approximately 27 kg) of luggage free of charge, whereas the Eastern Transport Company charged £25 and transported 80 lb

(approximately 36 kg) of luggage free of charge.[81] As a comparison, the cost of the journey between Beirut and London ranged between £40 and £50, while that of the journey from Aleppo to London was about £57 in the early 1920s.[82] In March 1924, having compared the services offered by the two companies, British Consul Satow remarked that 'Nairn will eventually have to reduce his prices, but at present he can get all the passengers he needs at his high tariff, i.e. £30 for the single journey.'[83] Before long, however, others expressed less optimism about the capacity of the first two companies to withstand competition. In May 1925, a note from the French High Commission's department of economic and agricultural affairs pointed out that whereas the low fares charged by certain companies attracted an increased number of travellers, in the long run they would compete unfavourably with the Nairn and the Eastern companies and thus harm the 'official organisation' of transdesert transport.[84] Another French advisor opined that the Nairn company would not always be able to compete with small-scale local companies, which used cars that were 'as decent, comfortable and fast' and charged much lower fares. He suggested that the future combined company (the Nairn Eastern) should seek to develop freight transport, as this type of transport would not be subject to competition from smaller carriers.[85]

Between the mid-1920s and the mid-1930s, the transport sector saw a steady decline in transport fares and the emergence of differentiated services by level of comfort with the introduction of first-, second- and third-class fares. By the end of 1924, it had become possible to cross the desert in a Hudson car for £10 and in a less comfortable car for £4 to £5.[86] Confronted with this competition, the Eastern Transport Company reduced its fares from £25 to £18 between 1925 and 1926 and developed a service for less fortunate travellers, who were offered them a seat in a van for £10.[87] In 1926, Kawatly, Tawil & Co. advertised a transport service in seven-seater cars for prices ranging from £7 to £10, stating that it represented a 75%

[81] TNA, FO 684/1/24/14, British Consul Smart to the Foreign Office, Beirut, 2 January 1924; NARA, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Persia, 1910-1929, microfilm roll 32, File 891.797, George Gregg Fuller (American vice consul) to the Department of State, Tehran, 25 January 1925.
[82] TNA, FO 684/1/23/1, Note on the route from Baghdad to London via Aleppo and Beirut prepared by Major Greenhouse, December 1922; Global Press Archive, 'Baghdad to London: Route via Aleppo and Beirut', *The Baghdad Times*; 11 November 1922. https://gpa.eastview.com/crl/mena/ (accessed 6 May 2022).
[83] TNA, FO 684/1/24/14, British Consul Smart to the Foreign Office, Beirut, 17 March 1924.
[84] CADN, 1SL/1/V/702, Note on the Beirut–Baghdad–Tehran route drawn up by Bériel (economic and agricultural affairs advisor to the French High Commission), Beirut, 4 May 1925.
[85] CADC, 48CPCOM43, 'Note sur les transports par automobiles en Syrie, Mésopotamie et Perse', Maugras (*Office commercial français du Levant*), Beirut, 31 October 1925.
[86] TNA, FO 371/10093, Report on the Beirut–Baghdad–Tehran Motor Route by Acting Vice-Consul Norman Mayers, Beirut, 26 October 1924.
[87] TNA, FO 371/10093, Memorandum on 'The Position and Prospects of the Eastern Transport Co.' by Mr Kettaneh, attached to a letter from the Department of Overseas Trade dated 13 September 1924; TNA, FO 371/11466, BBTA Circular Letter, Beirut, 25 March 1926.

saving on the Nairn prices.[88] Low rates were a strong selling point. By 1927, travellers wishing to cross the desert could choose between first-class services priced between £10 and £18, second-class services priced between £5 and £8 and even third-class services (in lorries) at a cost ranging between £2 and £5.[89] Under these circumstances, the bankruptcy of Kawatly, Tawil & Co. and Makhzumi & Co. pleased the Nairn Transport Company and its supporters, who considered this to be the end of competition from local companies. In May 1928, a memorandum written in English, presumably by Norman Nairn himself, summarised the situation of the transport sector between Damascus and Baghdad as follows:

> As it is, the native lines have practically ceased to exist for European traffic, and the Nairn Company is giving a better service than ever before and expending large sums on experiments with a view to still further improving the conditions.[90]

Nonetheless, the late 1920s witnessed the emergence of new companies that sought to offer a cheaper service than the Nairn Eastern Transport Company, but one that was nevertheless of good quality. In 1929, Shaban Transport Co. offered a seat in a four-seater car for £7 and a seat in a six-seater car for £5. Debosh & Akkash, which provided a similar service in four-seater cars that was £1 cheaper, advertised their 'unbeatable prices'. Both companies also ran a third-class service in vans for only £2–3.[91] The Nairn Eastern Company was forced to reduce its fares steadily. Thus, the company's standard fare of £30 in 1923 was brought down to £20 in 1927 and to £16 in 1931.[92] In April 1934, a circular letter announced further reductions in fares. The cost of the journey from Bagdad to Beirut was now £7.10 and £5.10 for first- and second–class fares, respectively and an extra £1 for the continuing journey to Haifa (via Beirut). However, the price no longer included the provision of accommodation in Rutbah and food on the way.[93] As the British vice-consul in Beirut pointed out, several factors had forced the Nairn brothers to lower their fares:

> At first the Nairn Company, having a monopoly of the traffic, were able to charge a high rate for the transport of passengers. […] Partly as a result of increased competition and partly owing

[88] CADC, 48CPCOM43, Kawatly, Tawil & Co. to the Acting French High Commissioner, Beirut, 17 June 1926.
[89] LON, R981/12B/49616/61055, the Health Directorate of the Ministry of Interior, Baghdad to *Conseil sanitaire maritime et sanitaire*, Cairo, 18 August 1927.
[90] TNA, CO 730/135/3, Memorandum on the Nairn Eastern Transport Company, 22 May 1928. Norman Nairn expressed similar optimism in 1925, when the Eastern Transport Company seemed to be on the brink of bankruptcy: TNA, FO 371/10831, Norman Nairn to Sir Albert Stern, Beirut, 26 November 1925. See also TNA, CO 732/31/2, Satow (British consul, Beirut) to the Department of Overseas Trade, 14 February 1928.
[91] TNA, CO 732/39/11, Appendix to extract from Economic Report No.149 for the fortnight ending 13 December 1929; AUB, advertisement placed for Debosh & Akkash in *Al-Sha'b*, 18 March 1928, p. 3.
[92] Ibid. See also Christina Phelps Grant, *The Syrian Desert*, p. 283.
[93] TNA, FO 371/17829, Nairn Transport Company Circular Letter, dated 14 April 1934, attached to a letter from the British consul, Damascus, 27 April 1934.

> to economies affected in running expenses the price was gradually bought down until to-day [*sic*] the cost of the same journey is nine pounds first class with a rebate of 10% for a return ticket.[94]

Indeed, the steady decline in transport fares over time was not only due to increasing competition in the transport market. The companies managed to lower their fares by using vehicles and equipment more suitable for desert driving, thus reducing wear and tear. They also benefited from lower fuel prices.[95] Notwithstanding these efforts, competition remained a major influencing factor. In the long run, the pressure on companies to continually lower their fares was detrimental for all of them. In October 1931, five local companies agreed to fix the price of transport in their six-seater vehicles at 24 Syrian gold pounds, regardless of the number of seats occupied. These companies were Debosh & Akkash, the National Co., Sawaf & Seyada, Shaban Transport Co. and Daniel Iskandar. *L'Orient* spoke of a merger of these companies, but the French corrected this statement, noting that it merely reflected an agreement regarding the prices they charged.[96] Other companies sought to maintain their position in the transdesert transport sector by specialising in one type of traffic.

Branding the 'Nairn Way'

In his book on *The Nairn Way: Desert Bus to Baghdad* published in 1980, John Munro made the following statement:

> [W]hat enabled the Nairns to remain at the head of their competitors was their continuing effort to improve their service and effect a wide range of economies. Among other things, they realised that they would have to direct their publicity towards securing a higher-class clientele than that of rival agencies […].[97]

Indeed, although the Nairn brothers catered to a wealthy clientele in search of comfort from the outset, fierce competition forced them to specialise even more in luxury service during the 1920s and 1930s. During this period, the Nairn Eastern Transport Company worked to build a brand image in which its service was equated with comfort, speed, reliability and safety.

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[94] TNA, FO 684/7/34/14, Memorandum on transdesert traffic written by Frank H. Todd (British vice-consul in Damascus), enclosed in a letter from the British consul-general, Beirut to the British consul, Damascus, 6 April 1934.

[95] TNA, FO 624/7/368, Report on the work of the Indian Section of the British consulate for the year 1935, Baghdad: 'Cheap motor transport has developed very rapidly in Iraq during the last years aided by the comparative cheapness of petrol and the improvement of road surfaces.'

[96] CADN, 1SL/1/V/702, Note by the French economic affairs advisor, Beirut, 17 October 1931; Aubouard (diplomatic office of the French High Commission), Beirut,13 November 1931.

[97] John M. Munro, *The Nairn Way*, p. 67.

Already in 1923, the Nairn brothers placed great emphasis on ensuring that their Cadillacs and Buicks were not only suitable for desert driving but were also more comfortable than standard passenger cars (especially Fords).[98] Travellers using the Nairn service were also treated to lunch and tea in the desert in the most cosy atmosphere, as stated in a company leaflet in 1924.[99] The spirit of one such tea party was captured in April 1931 by a team from Fox Movietone News who filmed the desert journey of a Nairn Eastern convoy.[100] Furthermore, the company based its brand image on the assurance of reliability and safety that the use of 'British personnel' was assumed to offer, according to British officials.[101] 'All of the drivers are British ex-Service men with long experience of motor transport and of the East', claimed one of the company leaflets in the mid-1920s.[102] The Nairn drivers came from the British Commonwealth, with many being from Great Britain, but others hailed from Canada, Scotland and Australia. At a later stage, the Nairn brothers also employed Lebanese and Italian drivers.[103]

Later, the Nairn brothers considered using larger and more comfortable vehicles than the Buick and Cadillac to keep operating costs down and win over customers. After one of his trips to the United States of America, Norman Nairn imported several Pullman Safeway buses between 1926 and 1927. These six-wheeler coaches could carry 15 passengers in addition to two drivers. They were equipped with large armchairs in which passengers could sleep and offered all of the comforts and practical conveniences. An official inauguration of one of these coaches, the 'Babylon', was organised in Baghdad in 1927 in the presence of King Faysal.[104]

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[98] TNA, FO 371/10093, Report on the Beirut–Baghdad–Tehran Motor Route by Acting Vice-Consul, Norman Mayers, Beirut, 26 October 1924; CADC, 48CPCOM42, 'Vers Bagdad', communiqué of the delegation of the French High Commission in Damascus, December 1923.

[99] NARA, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Asia, 1910-1929, microfilm roll 16, File 890d.79790g, Nairn Transport Company circular letter, enclosed in a letter from the US consulate in Bagdad to the Department of State, 14 April 1925.

[100] Moving Image Research Collections (MIRC), University of South Carolina, 'Primitive irrigation in Middle East—outtakes', 15 April 1931. https://digital.tcl.sc.edu/digital/collection/MVTN/id/3565/rec/1 (05'33–07'58) (accessed 6 May 2022).

[101] TNA, FO 684/1/24/14, British Consul Smart to the Foreign Office, Beirut, 2 January 1924.

[102] TCA, Volume Road 3, European Motor Coach Photographs: Nairn Transport Company, *The Overland Desert Mail*, p. 6.

[103] MECA, Nairn Transport Company Collection, Document No. 95: 'Nairn transport employees, as remembered by Norman and recounted to Muriel one day'. NB Muriel Nairn (Norman Nairn's wife) handed over the Nairn archives to the Middle East Centre Archive in Oxford in October 1987.

[104] Christina Phelps Grant, *The Syrian Desert*, p. 282; John M. Munro, *The Nairn Way*, p. 63. See also MECA, Nairn Transport Company Collection, 'New Car for the Desert Route', *The Baghdad Times*, 18 February 1926; 'A New Era in Desert Travel', *The Traveller's* Gazette 77:11 (November 1927), p. 7; TNA, FO 371/12269, Extract from Economic Report No. 83, dated 24 May 1927; Digital Library for International Research, American Chamber of Commerce for the Levant, 'American Cars on the Syrian Desert, *The Levant Trade Review* 14:12 (December 1926) http://www.dlir.org/arit-absc-about/205.html (accessed 6 May 2022).

FIGURE 11: INAUGURATION OF THE SIX-WHEELER COACH IN BAGHDAD

From left to right: Jaafar al-Askari, King Faysal, General Mance and Norman Nairn

Image credit: SALT Research, photograph attached to leaflet by the Nairn Transport Company entitled 'Motor Transport across the Syrian Desert: Damascus–Baghdad'. Title: 'Baghdad 1927'. By J. Vassal Adams (presumed photographer) https://archives.saltresearch.org/handle/123456789/13850 (accessed 8 April 2022). (Creative Commons).

The early 1930s saw further innovations relating to the vehicles used by the Nairn Eastern Transport Company. In 1930 and 1931, the company used more spacious buses procured from the American Car and Foundry Company. Finally, in 1933, they acquired their most famous vehicle, a two-part articulated coach, consisting of a four-wheeled carriage at the rear and a six-wheeled tractor at the front. Manufactured by the Marmon-Herrington Company in Indianapolis according to Norman Nairn's specifications, the bus had a capacity of 31 passengers and was considered one of the largest buses in the world at the time.[105] In July 1934, the British vice-consul in Baghdad, Frank H. Todd, wrote up a report on the new coach providing further details. The bus contained 12 standard seats and 19 first-class seats and could carry several tonnes of luggage. Also on board were two drivers, a steward and a mechanic who made up the crew. Finally, the interior was designed to offer the greatest possible comfort to passengers:

[105] John M. Munro, *The Nairn Way*, pp. 79–81; Maurice D. Hendry, 'The Cadillac Versus the Camel', *Veteran and Vintage Magazine* (1968), p. 188; TNA, FO 684/7/34/14, 'The Modern Caravan: Wheels across the Desert', *The Times*, 2 January 1934.

> […] fitted with comfortable and roomy reclining chairs with ample ventilation and head room; kitchenette with cupboard accommodation for crockery, food and drink, containing ice chest providing supply of iced water; twin-burner oil stove and washing sink. […] The coach is also fitted with toilet accommodation with running water.[106]

Finally, the Rutbah Hotel was the cornerstone of the outstanding service that the Nairn brothers aimed to market. On 2 April 1928, the Nairn Eastern Transport Company signed an agreement with the Iraq government to lease part of the Rutbah Post for a period of three years. From then on, the Nairn paid an annual rent of Rs. 3,000 (approx. £225) and managed the restaurant and 16-room hotel at Rutbah.[107] The company set about making Rutbah a place that reflected their brand image combining quality, efficiency and comfort. The accounts of travellers passing by Rutbah all described the pomp of the hotel: well-dressed waiters welcomed passengers on arrival, served cocktails with ice and cold beers as well as salmon and pudding, and clients could receive telegrams and read British newspapers.[108] Rutbah was what the British traveller and writer, Freya Stark, described with a hint of derision as 'a palace planted in the wilderness'.[109] The Lebanese writer Ameen Rihani recounted that when he entered the hotel, he found 'London in Rutbah'; people were drinking tea or whisky and the radio was playing Verdi's opera, *Aida*. He added, with some rancour, that the food was bad, the service Iraqi and the prices British.[110] The Nairn Eastern Transport Company merely operated the hotel, which remained the property of the Iraqi government. However, many visitors 'believe[d] that Rutba belong[ed] to Nairn and [gave] credit for his enterprise and foresight', noted Mr Wheatley, the British representative of the Iraqi Ministry of Communications and Works in August 1929.[111]

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[106] TNA, CO 732/65/5, Memorandum written by Frank H. Todd, British vice-consul in Damascus, 29 July 1934.
[107] TNA, CO 732/39/11, Agreement made on 2 April 1928 between Abd al-Muhsin Shalash (Government of Iraq) and the Nairn Eastern Transport Company. NB In 1929, 100,000 rupees were worth about £7,500. See: *Maps of Iraq with Notes for Visitors* (Baghdad: Government of Iraq, 1929), p. 14.
[108] Henry Barué, *De Saïgon à Paris : Par voie de terre* (Saigon: Auto Club Sud Indochinois, 1936), pp. 67–68; Edgar W. Knight, 'By Motor Across the Syrian Desert', *The High School Journal* 16:3 (1933), p. 96; William Martin, 'La traversée du désert', *Le Journal de Genève,* 20 November 1929, pp. 1–2. https://www.letempsarchives.ch/page/JDG_1929_11_20/1 (accessed 6 May 2022); Muhammad Thabit, *Jawla fī rubūʿ al-sharq al-adnā* (Cairo: Maktabat al-nahḍa al-miṣriyya, 1935), pp. 288–289; NARA, Record Group 84, U.S. consulate general, Beirut, vol. 473, Memorandum on Journey from Cairo to Tehran by George Wadsworth (U.S. first secretary, Teheran), February 1931.
[109] Freya Stark, *Baghdad Sketches* (London: Murray, 1937), p. 4.
[110] Amin al-Rihani, *Qalb al-ʿIraq* (Beirut: Ṣader, 1935), pp. 67–70.
[111] TNA, CO 732/39/11, Wheatley (advisor, Iraq Ministry of Works and Communications) to the High Commission for Iraq, Baghdad, 7 August 1929.

Experimenting with freight traffic

Other companies tried to find their niche within the transport sector by developing freight across the desert. Initially, freight traffic did not seem to be an option because the desert terrain though suitable for light vehicles, seemed insufficiently firm to support the use of heavy trucks. Mandate administrators on both sides of the desert pointed out that trucking would require much greater investments for paving roads and building solid bridges. A French advisor in economic matters noted in 1924 that the transport of sugar via the transdesert route would always be more expensive than transport via the sea route, unless major works were undertaken to enable three-tonne trucks to cross all year round without getting stuck.[112] Because of the uncertainties associated with trucking in the desert, early transport entrepreneurs were reluctant to invest in vehicles larger than those needed to transport passengers and mail. Nevertheless, some started to consider certain types of goods. As one French trader remarked in June 1924, the trade in light and valuable goods naturally followed the same route as travellers. He felt confident that the trade in silks, skins and even Iranian carpets would benefit from the transport of these goods through the desert.[113]

Indeed, freight traffic emerged slowly and gradually over the years, thanks to customs incentives from the respective governments but also due to the various strategies deployed by transport operators. Some entrepreneurs began experimenting with freight by adding small quantities of goods to the vehicles they already used for passengers and mail on the transdesert route.[114] In October 1924, the Kettaneh brothers owned five Dodge and Reo vans for transporting luggage. According to the acting British vice-consul in Beirut, Norman Mayers, they had been trying for some months to combine the transport of luggage and goods on these vehicles and were considering developing this activity further in the future.

> Kettaneh, for example, between April and August of this year, transported 11 ½ tons of goods, exclusive baggage. On one trip he took to Bagdad 150 motor tyres. On another he carried 600 kilog. [*sic*] of cloth, for which he was paid 7 ½ piastres a kilogramme. He has in addition taken to Bagdad a consignment of books for the Ministry of Education, motor spare parts, boots and shoes made in Damascus, boxes of Damascus crystalised fruits, arak,

[112] CADN, 1SL/1/V/702, Note on the Beirut–Baghdad–Tehran route drawn up by Bériel (economic and agricultural affairs advisor to the French High Commission), Beirut, 4 May 1925.
[113] CADC, 48CPCOM42, Gentizon, 'Beyrouth-Téhéran', *France-Perse: Bulletin Officiel du Groupe d'Etudes Economiques* 1:1 (June 1924), p. 1. Gentizon opined that 'it is a constant economic law that all goods of high value, low weight and low volume should follow the same path as travellers.' (In French: 'Une loi économique constante veut d'autre part que toutes les marchandises de grande valeur, de poids réduits et de faible volume suivent le même chemin que les voyageurs.')
[114] Raoul Blanchard, 'La route du désert de Syrie', *Annales de Géographie* 34:189 (1925), p. 243.

> odd cases of champagne, a quantity of electrotypes, some gramophones and discs, odd personal effects, clothes and some cinema films.[115]

The Kettaneh brothers thus experimented with all types of goods and by mid-1924 were already transporting significant volumes.

According to Norman Mayers, certain requirements needed to be met for this traffic to continue to develop, prominent among which were agreements on low transit duties and the establishment of depots along the route.[116] Towards the end of 1924, the French and British Mandate authorities began to hold discussions on a transit agreement between Iraq on the one hand and Lebanon and Syria on the other, with the latter two countries forming an economic unit in terms of their currency and customs tariffs, which would last until 1950.[117] The main objective of the negotiations was to link the two mandated areas commercially. On 15 January 1925, the French reminded the High Commissioner for Iraq of his commitments to international transit and urged him to speed up the ratification of the Syro–Iraqi transit convention, pointing out that goods transported by Kettaneh from Syria to Iran continued to be subject to customs duties when passing through Iraq.[118] About two weeks later, the convention came into force, thus reducing customs duties on goods transiting through Lebanon, Syria and Iraq to 0.5% *ad valorem* (Iraq had already reduced these duties from 1% to 0.5% in 1924).[119] As High Commissioner Sarrail noted in May 1925, the transdesert route was already being used for valuable and seasonal goods. Baghdad-based traders chose the desert route to import certain commodities from Beirut that needed to be delivered quickly or could not be ordered well in advance, such as 'spring novelties or white shoes in summer'.[120] Valuable and relatively light goods continued to constitute the bulk of transit trade in the years following the transit convention, and the volume of goods traffic increased significantly, not least because the lowering of customs duties led to a steady reduction in transport rates.[121]

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[115] TNA, FO 371/10093, Report on the Beirut–Baghdad–Tehran Motor Route by Acting Vice-Consul Norman Mayers, Beirut, 26 October 1924.
[116] Ibid.
[117] Élisabeth Picard, *Liban-Syrie, intimes étrangers: Un siècle d'interactions sociopolitiques* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2016), pp. 126–138.
[118] CADN, 1SL/1/V/699, Verchère de Reffye (the general secretary to the French High Commission) to Henry Dobbs, Beirut, 15 January 1935.
[119] CADN, 1SL/1/V/699, High Commissioner Sarrail to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Paris, 29 January 1925. On the transit convention of 31 January 1925, see also Frank Peter, *Les entrepreneurs de Damas*, p. 208.
[120] CADC, 48CPCOM42, High Commissioner Sarrail to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Paris, 22 May 1925; LON, R28bis/1/59854/4284, French Mandate over Syria and Lebanon, Administrative Report for the Year 1926, p. 248.
[121] As Frank Peter points out, during the 1920s, whereas trade between Syria and Iraq showed a decreasing tendency, transit trade across the desert expanded; see Frank Peter, *Les entrepreneurs de Damas*, pp. 207–210. See also TNA, FO 371/17829, Humphrys (British Ambassador) to Sir John Simon, Baghdad, 20 March 1934;

Another strategy adopted by transport entrepreneurs to pioneer the transit trade was to combine the import of goods with new vehicles. The transdesert routes provided a pathway for new vehicles that were imported via Mediterranean ports to Iraq and Iran.[122] In the mid-1920s, car dealers in Baghdad and Mosul imported vehicles partly through Basra and partly through Beirut and the Syrian Desert. In the latter case, they loaded the new vehicles with passengers, whose fares covered the cost of the desert journey and the double customs duties (on entering the French Mandate territories as well as Iraq).[123] Conversely, combining the import of vehicles and goods was a way for some carriers to make freight traffic more profitable. In the mid-1920s, most of the goods transported across the Syrian Desert headed from west to east.[124] According to French statistics, in 1927 and 1928, the volume of freight traffic from Damascus to Baghdad was about double that of freight traffic in the opposite direction.[125] This difference decreased in the following years, as shown in the above tables (Table 1–3).[126] However, the disparity during the earlier period posed a challenge to contractors planning to develop freight between Beirut, Baghdad and Tehran, as the trucks on the westbound journey were loaded sparsely or not at all.

The Lebanese entrepreneur, Michel Gemayel, managed to find a temporary solution to the problem. As the French Minister in Tehran noted in July 1928, Mr Gemayel imported Berliet trucks into the port of Beirut, loaded them with goods and drove them across the desert and on to Tehran, where he sold both the trucks and the goods.[127] Between April and May 1928, Michel Gemayel became the agent of the Berliet company in Tehran, a position that he held until 1939.[128] During this period, he greatly contributed to the expansion of the French car

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TNA, FO 684/7/34/3, Memorandum on transdesert traffic by Frank H. Todd, enclosed in a letter from British Consul Mackereth to the British consul in Baghdad, Damascus, 26 April 1934.

[122] In December 1925, for example, the Nairn Transport Company took thirty-four-tonne Leyland trucks, which had been purchased by the Iranian government to transport grain to the country's food-stressed central regions, across the desert. TNA, FO 371/11466, General Mance, Baghdad to Sir Albert Stern, London, 28 December 1925.

[123] NARA, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Asia, 1910–1929, microfilm roll 22, File 890g.50: Report on 'Motor Cars, Roads, Travel & Soils in the Mosul & Kirkuk Areas of Iraq' by John Randolph (U.S. consul, Baghdad), 22 January 1924.

[124] TNA, FO 371/10093, Report on the Beirut–Baghdad–Tehran Motor Route by Acting Vice-Consul Norman Mayers, Beirut, 26 October 1924.

[125] See French statistics included in TNA, FO 424/632, British Consul Satow to the High Commissioner for Palestine, Damascus, 16 April 1929.

[126] This is also evidenced by the statistics for the years 1927 to 1933: TNA, FO 684/7, Statistics attached to a letter from British Consul Mackereth to the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Damascus, 12 April 1934.

[127] CADC, 50CPCOM358, Wilden (Minister of France in Iran) to the French Foreign Ministry, Tehran, 13 July 1928.

[128] Houchang E. Chehabi and Hassan I. Mneimneh, 'Five Centuries of Lebanese–Iranian Encounters', in Houchang E. Chehabi (ed.), *Distant Relations: Iran and Lebanon in the last 500 years* (Oxford: Centre for Lebanese Studies, 2006), p. 27.

manufacturer.[129] By June 1928, Gemayel had already transported a hundred Berliet trucks from Beirut to Tehran and had also acquired contracts with the French firms, Michelin and Bergougnan, to import a hundred tonnes of tyres into Iran.[130] For some time, the Berliet trucks were forbidden to disembark at the port of Beirut, as the practice of combining vehicles and goods in transit was not actually legal. This restriction led to the intervention of the French Minister in Tehran and even prompted the Michelin Company to threaten to export its tyres to Iran via the Persian Gulf.[131] The French High Commissioner eventually decided to turn a blind eye because he considered that for the time being, Gemayel's business was appropriate and useful for developing trade with Iran. For a while, he allowed Gemayel to load his new trucks with goods, even though they were crossing French territory under the transit regime.[132]

Thus, it is clear that a multiplicity of transport contractors offering diverse services, largely because of growing competition, plied the Baghdad–Damascus route during the first decade of its use. From the viewpoint of transdesert mobility, this competition certainly brought a lot of benefits, as it led to a steady decrease in transport fares, making travel across the desert affordable for more people. It also prompted transport companies to offer different types of service and pioneer new areas of transport, such as freight in the case of the Kettaneh brothers. Yet this situation also put companies under great pressure and was not sustainable in the long term, as evidenced by the agreement on transport rates involving several local companies. The transdesert transport sector was not only promising but it was also risky. The threat of bankruptcy for companies unable to bear the decrease in fares to non-remunerative rates endangered the entrepreneurs and their families and placed the transdesert transport system itself at risk. In the 1930s, the sector was reshaped through the combined influence of several developments discussed above: the rise of local companies, the challenge they posed to the Nairn Eastern Transport Company and the French incentive regime and fierce competition. In addition, another development shook the foundations on which the transport sector had rested during its first decade. This development was the rise of the Iraqi contractor, Haim Nathaniel,

[129] The French manufacturing company sought to expand its activities around the Mediterranean during the interwar period, notably in Algeria and Turkey, see Pierre Thevenot, 'La coopération économique et industrielle entre Berliet et la République turque naissante dans les années 1920' (MA thesis, Université Lumière Lyon 2, 2020). See also the unfinished PhD thesis of Meriem Khellas on Berliet in Algeria: https://theses.fr/s178151 (accessed 18 April 2022).
[130] TNA, AIR 23/390, Memorandum by the Inspector General of Police, Baghdad, 27 November 1928; CADC, 50CPCOM399, Wilden (Minister of France in Iran) to the French Foreign Ministry, Tehran, 5 June 1928.
[131] CADC, 50CPCOM399, Michelin representative to Wilden (Minister of France in Iran), Tehran, 30 May 1928; Gemayel Transport Company to Wilden, Tehran, 30 May 1928; Wilden to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Tehran, 4 June 1928.
[132] CADC, 50CPCOM358, Secretary General of the High Commissioner to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Beirut, 23 November 1928.

who enjoyed British and Iraqi support and who further concretised the Haifa–Baghdad route, thereby reviving Franco–British rivalries.

The Revival of the Haifa–Baghdad Route Project

The conclusion that emerged from the experience of the Nairn Transport Company during the Great Syrian Revolt was that the route through the Palestinian and Transjordanian parts of the Syrian Desert was impractical. Nonetheless, in the 1930s, new conditions for reviving the project of the Haifa–Baghdad route were met, starting with the construction of a road by the Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC) through the lava belt region along the route of the Kirkuk–Haifa oil pipeline. Historical scholarship has highlighted the intensification of Franco–British rivalry in the 1930s over the issue of oil transportation to the Mediterranean and the competition between the ports of Beirut and Haifa.[133] But the matter of transdesert routes also played an important role in the resurgence of Franco–British rivalry.

The rise of the Iraqi Railways canvasser: Haim Nathaniel

In early May 1928, the Iraqi postal administration decided not to renew the Nairn Eastern Transport Company's postal contract and announced a call for tenders, indicating that they would select a company offering lower rates so as to convince other governments to send their mail via the transdesert route. At the end of November 1928, the Iraqi government chose to entrust its mail to the Jewish Iraqi contractor, Haim Nathaniel.[134] The French objected, recalling that in 1923, the two postal administrations had jointly agreed to entrust international mail to the Nairn Transport Company. After lengthy negotiations, the two postal administrations reached an agreement in February 1929 to re-establish a common postal service at competitive rates. From then on, the Nairn Eastern Transport Company and Haim Nathaniel shared a twice-weekly postal service operating in both directions.[135]

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[133] Jacob Norris, *Land of Progress*, pp. 47–54; Cyrus Schayegh, *The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World*, pp. 171–177; 249–255.

[134] CO 730/135/3, Office of the Director General of Posts and Telegraphs to the Nairn Eastern Transport Company, Baghdad, 12 May 1928; Note from the Nairn Eastern Transport Company, 22 May 1928; Douglas W. Gumbley (Inspector General of Posts and Telegraphs) to Nairn Eastern Transport Company, Baghdad, 19 July 1928; LON, R2315/6A/14172/655, British Mandates over Iraq: Report on Administration for 1928, p. 124.

[135] TNA, FO, 371/13745, Secretary General of the French High Commission to the High Commissioner for Iraq, Beirut, 20 December 1928; LON R2308/6A/20070/536, French Mandate over Syria and Lebanon: Report on the Administration of These Territories for 1929, pp. 49–50; CADN, 1SL/1/V/703, Note by the *Inspection Générale des Postes et Télégraphes*, Beirut, 3 December 1929; LON, R2308/6A/24559/536, French Mandate over Syria: Administration Report for the Year 1930, pp. 70–71.

Besides transporting mail, Haim Nathaniel distinguished himself in the freight transport sector in the late 1920s, taking advantage of his position as canvassing agent for the Iraqi Railways. His company prospected and handled long-distance goods traffic in cooperation with the Iraqi Railways, shipping companies and numerous small carriers who operated on Haim Nathaniel's behalf under a system of through bills of lading.[136] The tables presented earlier (Table 1–3) show that Haim Nathaniel assumed a leading role in freight transport during this period, transporting about 500 tons of goods in 1929 and 1200 tons in 1931, which accounted for 23% and 57% of the transdesert goods traffic, respectively. By the end of 1932, his company was handling 85% of the trade in goods across the Syrian Desert.[137] That year, Haim Nathaniel used sixty trucks to transport goods from Iran to Baghdad and from there either to Basra or to Beirut, working with the Iraqi Railways on the Iraq sections. According to a British economic report, the transport of goods from Iran to Europe and the United States was only 10% more expensive via the transdesert route and Beirut than via Basra and offered a time saving of about 40%.[138]

Haim Nathaniel's important role in trade continued to grow in the following years. As Hanna Batatu has pointed out, he also enjoyed connections with leading political figures, including Jamil al-Midfa'i, who served as Prime Minister several times from 1933. By the late 1930s, Haim Nathaniel had become an influential millionaire and his company was one of the most powerful in the Baghdad Chamber of Commerce.[139] He was one of the 25 'first class' members of the Chamber, as were many other Iraqi Jewish traders, who, according to Batatu, 'constituted perhaps the most important mercantile group' in Baghdad at the time.[140]

The pipeline and the road

The expansion of Haim Nathaniel's company revived French fears that the control of the Baghdad–Damascus route would pass into British and Iraqi hands. In early 1930, rumours were already circulating among French officials that Haim Nathaniel was being supported by the Iraqi authorities, whose aim was to put the Lebanese and Syrian companies out of business

[136] CADN, 1SL/1/V/703, Note from the political cabinet of the High Commission, Beirut, 8 September 1934, p. 6.
[137] CADN, 1SL/1/V/702, Weber (acting delegate of the High Commissioner) to the French High Commissioner, Damascus, 18 December 1932.
[138] TNA, CO 732/53/7, Extract from Economic Report No. 4, April 1932.
[139] Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: A Study of Iraq's Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of its Communists, Ba'thists and Free Officers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978, 2004), pp. 246, 311.
[140] Ibid., p. 244.

and secure a monopoly on transdesert traffic.[141] The laying of the pipeline between Kirkuk and Haifa by the Iraq Petroleum Company would consolidate these fears.

In 1925, the Turkish Petroleum Company (TPC) received a concession from the Iraqi government to prospect for oil fields in the Kirkuk area in order to extract and market petroleum. The first site was dug at Baba Gurgur and exploited from 1927. The main shareholders of the TPC—the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, the Royal Dutch Shell, the Near East Development Corporation and the Compagnie Française des Pétroles—each held 23.75% of the shares, with the remaining 5% held by the Armenian entrepreneur, Calouste Gulbenkian.[142] As soon as exploitable oil deposits were discovered in the vicinity of Kirkuk, discussions were held on the construction of a pipeline. The TPC, renamed Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC) in 1929, held that transporting the oil to the Mediterranean and Europe would be cheaper through the Syrian Desert than through the port of Basra and the Suez Canal. Against this background, the French and British lobbied for the termination point of the proposed pipeline to be a port in their territories. The negotiations resulted in an agreement to build two pipelines, one leading to Tripoli in Lebanon and the other to Haifa in Palestine.[143] From the beginning, the British considered the exploitation and transport of oil to be closely connected with the development of transdesert transportation. As Jacob Norris has pointed out, they 'hoped that the IPC would finance the railway line as part of its concession for the development of the Mosul oil fields'.[144] Whereas the IPC was initially encouraged to explore the technical and financial possibilities of building a railway between Baghdad and Haifa, it was ultimately the British firm, Rendel, Palmer and Tritton that was commissioned to inspect the proposed railway between 1930 and 1931. Their study cast many doubts on the suitability of the project, as they found that the railway would attract little local traffic and that Iran could decide to channel its trade through Russia or the Persian Gulf. Subsequently, the British military tried to find private contractors to start building the railway, but without success.[145] Instead, the Baghdad–Haifa route came into being as a motorway.

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[141] CADN, 1SL/1/V/703, 'Note relative à la Conférence syro-irakienne des 22 et 23 janvier 1930 sur le contrôle du trafic de la route Damas-Bagdad', p. 14.

[142] Arbella Bet-Shlimon, *City of Black Gold: Oil, Ethnicity, and the Making of Modern Kirkuk* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2019), pp. 33–36, 82–88; Philippe Pétriat, *Aux pays de l'or noir: Une histoire arabe du pétrole* (Paris: Gallimard, 2021), pp. 30–41; Peter Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq*, pp. 65–92.

[143] Jacob Norris, *Land of Progress*, pp. 102–109; May Seikaly, *Haifa: Transformation of an Arab Society, 1918–1939* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1995), pp. 72–74; Zehra Taşdemir Yaşın, 'Through the Story of a Road and a Pipeline: The Formation of Commodity Frontiers and Modern States', *Commodities of Empire*, Working Paper No. 26 (February 2017), pp. 1–16.

[144] Jacob Norris, *Land of Progress*, p. 115.

[145] E.H. Keeling, 'The Proposed Haifa-Baghdad Railway', *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society* 21:3 (1934), pp. 373–393; Keith Neilson, 'The Baghdad to Haifa Railway: The Culmination of Railway Planning for Imperial

In the late 1930s, the British military authorities endeavoured to build a major road through the desert regions of Transjordan to accommodate the passage of troops.[146] But, as a 1936 report of the British Air Ministry on the Baghdad–Haifa road project makes clear, the plans took into account the road that the IPC had built through the so-called 'lava belt' when laying the pipeline.[147] In late 1932, indeed, the IPC decided to lay a construction road through the rugged desert stretches between Rutbah and Mafraq to enable its trucks to access the construction sites. On learning that the company was planning to spend nearly 50 million francs to build 160 km of roads, even though, in their opinion, there were other possibilities to choose from, the French administration came to the conclusion that the IPC was being called upon to take over the cost of building a future British 'imperial route'. They were all the more irritated that 23.75% of the company's funds comprised French shares.[148] One of the directors of the Compagnie française des pétroles, Mr de Montaigu, assured them that the IPC simply intended to build a temporary road, which would become unusable once it was no longer of use to the company.[149]

In 1934, the French businessman, Pierre Watteau, who travelled from Baghdad to Haifa on behalf of the Beirut Port Company, reported the existence of a motorable road. Across the lava zone, the IPC had built a road over about 150 km using volcanic stones that had been crushed and compacted, which they then covered with a layer of gravel and sand before finally rolling the road. According to Pierre Watteau, the road enabled IPC trucks to pass and passenger cars to reach 50–55 km/h, but many sections were still difficult to negotiate.[150] The work undertaken by the IPC was nevertheless a first step towards the development of the Baghdad–Haifa route. Haim Nathaniel's move to divert his postal service to the south was another.

Defence East of Suez', in T. G. Otte and Keith Neilson (eds.), *Railways and International Politics: Paths of Empire, 1848-1945* (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 168; Jacob Norris, *Land of Progress*, pp. 113–116; Morton B. Stratton, 'British Railways and Motor Roads in the Middle East, 1930-1940', pp. 193–195. On the initial incentives for the IPC to inspect the railway project, see also TNA, FO 424/632, Sir Austen Chamberlain (Foreign Office) to M. de Fleuriau (French Ambassador, London), 28 November 1928.

[146] Robert S. G. Fletcher, *British Imperialism and 'The Tribal Question': Desert Administration and Nomadic Societies in the Middle East, 1919-1936* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 76–77; Cyrus Schayegh, *The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World*, p. 251.

[147] TNA, FO 371/20786, 'Haifa–Bagdad Road. Proposals for Road to Meet Military Requirements', the Air Ministry, London, November 1936. See also Morton B. Stratton, 'British Railways and Motor Roads in the Middle East, 1930-1940', p. 197.

[148] CADN, 1SL/1/V/704, the French High Commissioner to the French Foreign Ministry, Beirut, 27 January 1933.

[149] Ibid., 10 February 1933.

[150] CADN, 1SL/1/V/703, 'Etude de la route Bagdad–Haifa: Comparaison avec la route Bagdad–Beyrouth', from Pierre Watteau to M. de Lassus Saint-Genies, Beirut, 2 May 1934. See also CADC, 50CPCOM588, Lagarde (delegate general of the High Commissioner) to the French Foreign Minister, Beirut, 24 May 1935.

Haim Nathaniel goes south

What the French feared most happened in the summer of 1932. In early July, Haim Nathaniel diverted part of his mail service from the Baghdad–Damascus route to the Baghdad–Haifa route. Upon conducting an investigation, the French consulate in Baghdad noted that Haim Nathaniel's decision was motivated by recriminations against the Syrian–Lebanese postal administration for not respecting the arrangement with the Iraqi postal administration in force since 1929.[151] During the first weeks or months of operation, Haim Nathaniel experienced considerable difficulty. As reported by the U.S. consul in Iraq, several trucks broke down and some drivers even refused to proceed further on this route.[152] Another contractor, Colonel Dwyer,[153] who was interested in plying cars between Baghdad and Haifa, made a first attempt in mid-July 1932 and reported numerous tyre punctures when crossing the lava belt.[154] Despite a difficult start, however, Haim Nathaniel maintained his service on the Baghdad–Haifa route and soon benefited from the road being built by the IPC through the lava belt.

Haim Nathaniel was encouraged in his undertaking by the Palestinian government, which immediately granted him a concession to transport Palestinian mail on the southern route.[155] His initiative was evidently also supported, if not urged, by other actors. The Iraqi Railways, for example, intended to develop the Baghdad–Haifa route for goods traffic and pushed their canvasser agent to investigate the possibilities of running freight traffic on the southern route. As a British report noted in April 1932, the Director of the Iraqi Railways, Ramsay Tainsh, 'consider[ed] it important that the Baghdad-Haifa motor road should be well-established for freight before the Baghdad-Haifa railway [was] constructed because the new railway [would] then on completion find traffic ready to hand'.[156] Likewise, the British High Commissioner for Iraq was instrumental in encouraging Nathaniel's enterprise, with the aim of

[151] Haim Nathaniel complained that the postal administration entrusted mail to the Nairn Transport Company on Wednesdays, whereas the agreement stipulated that his company should handle mail arriving in Damascus between Tuesday noon and Friday morning at 7 a.m. (the time of departure of the convoy). See CADC, 50CPCOM589, the French consulate in Baghdad to the general delegate of the High Commissioner, Baghdad, 19 July 1932.
[152] NARA, Record Group 84, U.S. consulate, Jerusalem, 1920–1944, microfilm roll 29, File 867N.712 90G/2: U.S. Consul Sloan to the Secretary of State, Baghdad, 7 July 1932.
[153] A former colonel in the British army, Dwyer was initially Haim Nathaniel's partner before setting up his own transport company in Baghdad. CADN, 1SL/1/V/702, Note on Transdesert Transport written by Veber (French High Commission), Beirut, 26 March 1933.
[154] Israel State Archives [hereinafter: ISA], Grant of facilities to Haim Nathaniel Vol.1: Report on Overland Route Jerusalem to Baghdad by Colonel E. Dwyer, Baghdad, 18 July 1932.
[155] NARA, Record Group 84, U.S. consulate, Jerusalem, 1920–1944, microfilm roll 29, File 876N.712 90G/3: U.S. consul to the Secretary of State, Beirut, 13 September 1932; File 876N.712 90G/5: U.S. consul to the Secretary of State, Jerusalem, 22 October 1932.
[156] TNA, CO 732/53/7, Extract from Economic Report No. 4 for April 1932.

developing freight traffic on the southern route in anticipation of the still planned transdesert railway.[157]

On the eve of the termination of the British Mandate in Iraq—which was admitted as an independent state into the League of Nations on 3 October 1932[158]—, the Iraqi government and King Faysal were also supportive of the development of the Baghdad–Haifa route. King Faysal, in particular, was keen to strengthen relations between Iraq and Transjordan, and the diversion of mail to Amman and Haifa was a step towards this.[159] In July 1932, the Iraqi Ministry of Finance noted that there was no transit agreement between Iraq and Palestine as well as Iraq and Transjordan that would facilitate Haim Nathaniel's enterprise. The Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs was therefore asked to enquire with the governments of these two countries whether they would be prepared to waive customs duties on goods in transit between their countries and Iraq.[160] Furthermore, in mid-September 1932, the Iraqi government authorised Haim Nathaniel to divert the mail he was carrying on behalf of Iraq to the southern route.[161] Thus, shortly before Iraq's independence, the Iraqi government was very much in line with the British stance on the issue of the Baghdad–Haifa route.

Customs Incentives as Weapons of War

Between October and November 1933, the Beirut-based economic weekly *Le Commerce du Levant*, described the transport situation between Iraq and the Mediterranean as a 'transdesert transport war'. In four articles, the newspaper discussed the escalating Franco–British rivalry over the expansion of the ports of Haifa and Beirut and the development of the Damascus–Baghdad and Haifa–Baghdad routes, portraying this competition as a frantic race to develop a commercial route into Iran. According to the author, the 'war of the ports' that was evident in the early days had turned into a 'war of transport' in which the transport companies were the key players.[162] As a strong advocate of French, Syrian and Lebanese economic interests, *Le Commerce du Levant* portrayed the situation as a British-led tariff war against

[157] ISA, Grant of facilities to Haim Nathaniel Vol.1: Humphrys (High Commissioner for Iraq) to Wauchope (High Commissioner for Palestine), Baghdad, 15 July 1932.
[158] Susan Pedersen, 'Getting Out of Iraq', p. 975.
[159] NARA, Record Group 84, U.S. consulate, Jerusalem, 1920–1944, microfilm roll 29, File 867N.712 90G/2: U.S. Consul Sloan to the Secretary of State, Baghdad, 7 July 1932.
[160] ISA, Grant of facilities to Haim Nathaniel Vol.1: Letter from the Iraqi Ministry of Finance to the Iraqi Ministry for Foreign Affairs, dated 21 July 1932, transmitted by the High Commissioner for Iraq to the High Commissioner for Palestine, Baghdad, 3 August 1932.
[161] TNA, CO 732/53/7, Extract from Iraq Economic Report No. 9 for September 1932.
[162] AUB, 'L'inauguration du port de Caiffa et la Guerre du Transport Transdésertique', *Le Commerce du Levant*, 14 October 1933, 18 October 1933, 25 October 1933 and 8 November 1933.

Syrian transdesert traffic, in which Haim Nathaniel acted as an agent of British imperial policy.[163] The author called on the French to seek a diplomatic solution, to upgrade the desert track and finally to support Franco-Lebanese and Franco-Syrian companies, even if this meant favouring only one particularly powerful company over the others.[164] What he was suggesting here was predictive of the evolution of the politics of incentives for transdesert carriers in the 1930s. The threat of traffic diversion to the Baghdad–Haifa route drove a reform of the customs exemption regime in the French Mandate states, which tended to encourage only large and powerful companies considered more likely to ensure the appeal of the Baghdad–Damascus route.

Questioning the incentive regime

From the late 1920s onwards, Debosh & Akkash applied for the benefits that could be availed of under Decree 1607. As reported by *Al-Sha'b* in January 1929, the company had requested assistance from the Syrian government and the French authorities. Having backed Kawatly, Tawil & Co. in 1927, *Al-Sha'b* now lent its support to Debosh & Akkash by calling on the authorities to support firms that worked in the interest of Syria.[165] Likewise, in February 1929, *Les Échos de Damas* insisted that Syrian companies should be subsidised by the state for reasons of public interest.[166] Around the same period, Adib Sha'ban applied repeatedly for the same customs exemptions. On 16 November 1932, he reminded the French High Commission that for five years, his company had been carrying mail between Beirut and Baghdad free of charge, but the French had always refused him the benefits of Decree 1607. As his company was now facing increasing difficulties, he announced that he would no longer grant this favour.[167] The following year, Adib Sha'ban highlighted the danger that Haim Nathaniel represented for transdesert traffic passing through Lebanon and Syria and requested French support to develop a strong passenger service between Beirut and Tehran that could counter the competition emanating from the southern route.[168]

Similarly, Haim Nathaniel sought to gain advantages in the French Mandate states by exploiting his new position of strength. In September 1928, he asked the Beirut Port Company

[163] Ibid., 18 October 1933.
[164] Ibid., 25 October 1933.
[165] AUB, 'Sharikat Debosh wa Akkash: wājib al-ḥukuma fī musā'adatiha wa tanshīṭiha', *Al-Sha'b*, 4 January 1929, p. 2.
[166] Georges Pharès, 'Tributaire sine die d'une société anglaise' *Les Échos de Damas*, 21 February 1929, p. 1. https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5568697q (accessed 19 April 2022).
[167] CADN, 1SL/1/V/702, Note from the High Commission's foreign relations department, Beirut, 16 November 1932.
[168] CADN, 1SL/1/V/702, Note from Shaban Transport Co., Beirut, 16 November 1933.

to reduce the taxes levied on the goods that his company transited through the port by threatening to divert its traffic to Haifa. In 1932, he told the French authorities that he was willing to maintain his traffic on the Baghdad–Damascus route if he was granted the customs exemptions under Decree 1607. He also suggested that benefits for transport companies from exemptions should be proportional to the tonnage they carried. The French rejected the proposal, responding that Haim Nathaniel could benefit from the same privileges enjoyed by the Nairn Transport Company if they agreed to enter into a partnership.[169] By this time, the Nairn brothers had been able to raise sufficient capital and regain a controlling interest in the Nairn Eastern Transport Company, which was renamed Nairn Transport Company.[170]

The new situation relating to the transdesert transport sector prompted much debate among French Mandate officials. The delegation in Damascus was strongly supportive of the Syrian companies. On 18 December 1932, Delegate Weber remarked to his superiors in Beirut that none of the local companies benefited from the exemptions of Decree 1607, although statistics for the first eleven months of 1932 showed that they 'still occup[ied] an important place in transdesert traffic: 60% for passengers, 14% for goods'[171] (Table 4). In his view, their situation was becoming increasingly difficult because of the ruthless competition from Haim Nathaniel and the lack of support from the French. In conclusion, Weber called on the High Commission to assist the Syrian companies for both political and economic reasons. Firstly, he argued that the French should 'not give the impression of favouring only foreign companies and neglecting local companies that provide the same services'. Secondly, he felt that encouraging local firms had become a necessity to guarantee the continuation of the Baghdad–Damascus route, as the French could not risk leaving all of the traffic in the hands of two powerful foreign companies that could end up abandoning the Syrian route for the southern one.[172]

TABLE 4: TRANSDESERT TRAFFIC IN 1932 (THE FIRST 11 MONTHS)

	Cars [%]	Passengers [%]	Goods [%]
Haim Nathaniel	46	23	85
Nairn	9.5	17	1
Debosh & Akkash	9.5	20	0
Sawaf & Seyada	12	15	8
Shaban	7.3	10	0.3

[169] CADN, 1SL/1/V/702, 'Transit International Beyrouth-Damas-Bagdad', prepared by Reclus (economic affairs department), Beirut, December 1932; Note on transdesert transport companies from the political cabinet of the French High Commission, Beirut, 19 November 1932.
[170] TNA, CO 732/53/7, Extract from Economic Report No. 8 for the month of August 1932, §216.
[171] CADN, 1SL/1/V/702, Weber (acting delegate of the High Commissioner) to the French High Commission, Damascus, 18 December 1932.
[172] Ibid.

Other (local) companies	15.7	15	5.7

In response to Weber's letter, the French High Commission's department in charge of foreign relations ('*relations extérieures*') agreed that measures should be taken to protect the interests of Syrian companies 'offering sufficient guarantees'. At the same time, they recommended further negotiations with Haim Nathaniel, considering that no Lebanese, Syrian or French company was in a position to compete with his company in terms of goods traffic. In other words, they wanted to keep all options open with the Iraqi company.[173] But the situation was about to change with the emergence of another company capable of handling freight transport across the desert, the Auto-Routière du Levant Company.

New measures to promote powerful companies

Throughout 1933, the High Commission's delegation in Damascus continued to side with the Syrian transport contractors. In March 1933, they urged the High Commissioner to hasten the promulgation of a decree under discussion, fearing that the proposed support would come too late for Debosh & Akkash.[174] Three months later, on 21 June 1933, the French finally revised the regime of incentives for companies transporting passengers through the desert by enacting Decree 89/LR, which revoked and replaced the provisions of Decree 1607. The new legislation exempted companies from the payment of customs duties as long as they had undertaken at least three round trips per month between Damascus and Baghdad during the past year. Companies that had carried more than 2,000 passengers received full duty exemption on their cars, tyres, spare parts, petrol and lubricating oils, and those that had carried between 1,500 and 2,000 passengers received a 50% duty exemption.[175] The conditions attached to the exemption were intended to limit competition on the Baghdad–Damascus route by restricting government support for powerful companies that could outcompete those just starting to operate on the Baghdad–Haifa route. The Nairn Transport Company and various local transport companies, such as Debosh & Akkash, benefited from the decree.[176]

Meanwhile, the French also took measures to develop trade across the French Mandate states. As early as 1932, the Beirut Port Company and the president of the Lebanese Chamber

[173] CADN, 1SL/1/V/702, Note from the French High Commission's foreign relations department, Beirut, 23 December 1932.
[174] CADN, 1SL/1/V/702, the French delegation to the French High Commissioner, Damascus, 19 January 1933 and 4 March 1933.
[175] Decree 89/LR, *Bulletin des actes administratifs du Haut-Commissariat*, 21 June 1933. https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6459856g/f2.item (accessed 21 March 2022).
[176] CADN 1SL/1/V/702, Pierre A. Trad (lawyer for Debosh & Akkash) to the French High Commissioner, Beirut, 29 September 1934.

of Commerce, Omar Daouk, advocated the creation of a free zone in the port where goods could transit without being subjected to customs control. The free zone was inaugurated by the Beirut Port Company on 20 January 1934.[177] In parallel, a special commission was established in July 1933 to work on measures for encouraging goods traffic across the desert. The discussions revolved around the international transit regime and new incentives for freight companies operating on the Baghdad–Damascus route.[178] After lengthy discussions, the commission finally came up with a revised draft of the incentive regime for transit trade in early 1934. Decree 28/LR of 2 February 1934 also reflected the overall objective of encouraging a limited number of powerful companies that would be able to develop their traffic on the Baghdad–Damascus route. The decree granted various customs exemptions to companies making at least 18 round trips annually per vehicle and carrying a total of at least 200 tonnes of goods in transit per year (and for rates less than 25 francs per 100 km).[179]

Moreover, the decree organised transit through the French Mandate territories by coordinating road and rail transport. During the interwar period, competition between these two modes of transport was a widespread concern not only in Europe but also in the European colonies, where governments implemented policies aimed at achieving a better alignment of road and rail transport.[180] In Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, the increase in self-employed drivers during the 1920s worried the railway companies.[181] In 1930, the Director of the Iraqi Railways, Colonel Ramsay Tainsh, stated in a memorandum that while competition had initially had a positive effect, the lowering of railway rates had now reached a limit. He therefore recommended that the Ministry of Communications and Works take responsibility for coordinating road and rail transport.[182] Around the same time, the Syrian railway company,

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[177] Samir Kassir, *Histoire de Beyrouth* (Paris: Perrin, 2012), pp. 360–363. See also Jacques de Monicault, *Le port de Beyrouth et l'économie des pays du Levant sous le mandat* français (Paris: Librairie technique et économique, 1936), pp. 45–50; Maxime de Dumast, 'Une Réalisation française au Levant: "Le port de Beyrouth"', communication to the *Académie de marine de Paris*, 25 January 1957, pp. 15–18.

[178] CADN, 1SL/1/V/701, Note from the economic affairs department of the French High Commission, Beirut, 16 January 1934.

[179] CADN, 1SL/1/V/703, Note from the political cabinet of the French High Commission, Beirut, 8 September 1934; Decree 28/LR, *Bulletin des actes administratifs du Haut-Commissariat*, 2 February 1924. https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k64751193/f3.item (accessed 25 March 2022). See also TNA, FO 371/17829, Acting British Consul Havard to Sir John Simon (the Foreign Office), Beirut, 15 February 1934.

[180] Nicolas Neiertz, *La coordination des transports en France: De 1918 à nos jours* (Vincennes: Institut de la gestion publique et du développement économique, 1999), pp. 5–79; Ralf Roth and Colin Divall (eds.), *From Rail to Road and Back Again?: A Century of Transport Competition and Interdependency* (London: Routledge, 2016). For an example from a British colony, see Jennifer Hart, *Ghana on the Go: African Mobility in the Age of Motor Transportation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), pp. 29–63.

[181] TNA, CO 935/1/11, Report of the High Commissioner on the Development of Iraq, 1920-1925 prepared by Henry Dobbs, 6 August 1925, p. 36; Richard Thoumin, *Géographie humaine de la Syrie centrale* (Paris: E. Leroux, 1936), p. 185; AUB, 'L'automobilisme au Liban', *Le Commerce du Levant*, 2 May 1930, p. 1.

[182] TNA, CO 730/162/5, Memorandum on Road and Railway Competition in Iraq by J. Ramsay Tainsh (Director, Iraqi Railways), Baghdad, 30 June 1930.

Damas-Hama et prolongements (hereinafter DHP), was competing with the Auto-Routière du Levant Company (hereinafter AR), a newly established company operating in northern Syria. Founded in 1929 by a conglomeration of various French shareholders, the AR brought new life into a previously established company that was experiencing difficulties.[183] The company set up coach services between Beirut, Tripoli, Latakia, Aleppo and Deir ez-Zor and tried for a while to run its vehicles as far as Mosul in Iraq, before finally deciding to focus on northern Syria. According to the figures transmitted to the French High Commissioner, the company transported nearly 800 passengers in September 1929 and 2,300 in October.[184] Fearing competition, the DHP tried its best to prevent this potential rival from raising enough capital to establish itself on a sound footing. By early 1930, the AR already seemed to be in financial difficulties.[185] Under these conditions, the French decided to support the AR to save it from bankruptcy, but as they wished to avoid harmful competition with the railways, they encouraged a solution entailing controlled collaboration between the two companies. An agreement was reached on 17 March 1932 in which the terms of cooperation were laid out between the AR and the various railway companies operating in the French Mandate states, namely the DHP, Société du Chemin de fer Bozanti-Alep-Nissibine et prolongements (BANP) and the Hijaz Railway. From this point on, the AR operated transport services between Beirut and Aleppo and between Aleppo and Deir ez-Zor in conjunction with the railway networks rather than in competition with them.[186]

Under these new circumstances, and in order to preserve the interests of the railway, the French decided to entrust the DHP with the transport of goods in transit between Beirut and Damascus. The goods would then be transferred from the railhead to the trucks belonging to the AR and Nairn companies for the remainder of the journey to Baghdad.[187] To implement the

[183] The Auto-Routière du Levant Company took over the aborted business project of André de Neufville, who himself had initially joined forces with Kawatly, Tawil & Co. and finally bought their equipment after their liquidation. TNA, FO 371/12269, British Consul Satow to the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Beirut, 31 October 1927; CADC, 50CPCOM358, the French High Commissioner to the French Foreign Minister, Beirut, 17 December 1927 and 21 June 1928.

[184] CADC, 50CPCOM358, Auto-Routière du Levant to French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Paris, 17 May 1929; High Commissioner Ponsot to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Beirut, 17 December 1929; TNA, FO 371/14553, British consul to the Foreign Office, Aleppo, 22 October 1930; TNA, FO 424/633, Acting Consul Meade to A. Henderson, Aleppo, 12 July 1930; CADN, 1SL/1/V/703, Note from the political cabinet of the French High Commission, Beirut, 8 September 1934.

[185] CADC, 50CPCOM588, the Foreign Ministry to the French High Commissioner, Paris, 30 January 1930.

[186] CADC, 50CPCOM588, the Foreign Ministry to the French High Commissioner, Paris, 13 February 1930; Note from the Foreign Minister, Paris, 17 March 1932; CADN, 1SL/1/V/701, Agreement between DHP, BANP and AR, 17 March 1932; 'Transports sur chemin de fer et sur route', Report written by Alphonse Algrin, Beirut, 2 September 1932. For more information on rail and road coordination in the French Mandate states, see Mari Oiry, 'Transports et société au Liban sous Mandat français' (MA thesis, ENS Lyon, 2005), pp. 135–143.

[187] CADN, 1SL/1/V/703, Note from the political cabinet of the High Commission, Beirut, 8 September 1934.

new scheme, the French oversaw negotiations between the Nairn Transport Company, the AR and the DHP, which resulted in a tacit agreement between the three parties (a so-called 'gentleman's agreement') to prevent competition and stimulate freight traffic along the Baghdad–Damascus route.[188]

A memorandum from the political cabinet of the French High Commission, dated September 1934, noted that the creation of a monopoly would have raised strong protests from local companies and from the delegation in Damascus. As a result, the memo continued, Decree 28/LR of 2 February 1934 continued to 'play both sides of the fence' ('*ménage encore la chèvre et le chou*'), as it did not explicitly exclude 'small transporters' but nevertheless granted advantages only to 'a large centralised company'. The political cabinet concluded that additional measures should be taken to limit the number of carriers operating on the Baghdad–Damascus route, and added:

> Il reste à déterminer dans quelles conditions [l'Auto-Routière du Levant] pourra éliminer les petits transporteurs sans que nous ayons à en supporter la répercussion politique à Damas.[189]

Proponents of the Baghdad–Haifa route strike back

By the end of 1932, Iraq had formally become a sovereign state. Nuri al-Said, the last Prime Minister of Mandate Iraq, was forced to resign by King Faysal, who wanted to form a government of greater consensus. The King appointed Naji Shawkat as the new Prime Minister and, in February 1933, a new government was elected which included both former supporters and opponents of Nuri al-Said.[190] For his part, former High Commissioner Humphrys became British Ambassador in Iraq. As outlined in the previous chapter, the British continued to have influence on the Iraqi state after 1932. They sought thereby to advance their interests in matters relating to the transdesert routes. In late June 1933, immediately following the issuance of Decree 89/LR by the French High Commissioner, the Director of the Iraqi Railways asked the British Ambassador in Baghdad to press the Iraqi government to establish the Baghdad–Haifa route as a transit route.[191] He did not know that in fact the Iraqi Finance Minister, Hikmat Sulayman, had just taken this step the day before. The Baghdad–Haifa route was officially

[188] TNA, FO 684/7/34/14, British Consul Mackereth to the Department of Overseas Trade, Damascus, 8 February 1934 as well as to the Foreign Office,16 February 1934; TNA, FO 684/8/382/14, Mackereth to Sir John Simon, Damascus, 20 February 1935; AUB, 'Le trafic transdésertique', *Le Commerce du Levant*, 7 May 1935, p. 1.
[189] CADN, 1SL/1/V/703, Note from the political cabinet of the High Commission, Beirut, 8 September 1934, p. 13. Translation: 'It remains to be determined under what conditions [Auto-Routière du Levant] will be able to eliminate small transporters without our having to bear the political repercussions in Damascus.'
[190] Peter Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq*, p. 156; Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, p. 77.
[191] ISA, Grant of facilities to Haim Nathaniel Vol.1: Ramsay Tainsh (Director, Iraqi Railways) to Empson (commercial secretary, British Embassy), Baghdad, 27 June 1933.

declared a transit route by the Iraqi government as of 1 July 1933, which meant that goods in transit were now subject to a transit duty of only 0.1%.[192]

King Faysal also remained strongly supportive of the development of the Baghdad–Haifa route until his death from a heart attack in September 1933. When Mr Blanquet, the French railway engineer and DHP representative, visited Iraq in May 1933, he was coldly received by the King and some Iraqi ministers. Following his visit, King Faysal reacted to French intentions to develop transit with the DHP and AR companies by creating a permanent transport board to keep the transport situation under constant review and to 'counteract the French threat to Iraqi communications', as the British Ambassador in Iraq put it.[193] The Iraqi government also introduced a licensing system that gave holders certain privileges, such as being allowed to pass the customs post of Ramadi without their goods being examined. The Nairn Transport Company was registered as a licensed company, but the Iraqi government initially denied this privilege to the AR before eventually granting it under certain conditions in May 1934.[194]

The death of King Faysal deprived Haim Nathaniel of significant support, as British Ambassador Humphrys noted; Iraqi ministers remained in favour of the Baghdad–Haifa route, but were not opposed to other options.

> Iraqis […] dislike the French plans to control trans-desert traffic and, although the death of King Feisal has removed much of the driving force in favour of Haim Effendi, they would welcome effective competition by the Transjordan route. They are, however, suspicious of a request for a definite undertaking to promote the development of a particular route, and Ministers are reluctant to take the responsibility of giving it. [195]

In other words, the newly independent government of Iraq did not want to block off trade and transit through Syria. From the perspective of the British Ambassador in Iraq, it was clear that the Iraqi ministers wanted to keep all options open.

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[192] TNA, CO 732/58/5, Customs Notification No. 7 signed by Hikmat Sulayman on 26 June 1933, attached to letter from the Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the British Embassy, Baghdad, 6 July 1933; Osborne Mance, *International Road Transport: Postal, Electricity and Miscellaneous Questions* (London: Oxford University Press, 1947), p. 49.

[193] TNA, CO 732/58/5, Ogilvie-Forbes to Sir John Simon, Baghdad, 7 June 1933; TNA, FO 481/23, Annual Report on Iraq for 1933, §266; TNA, FO 371/17829, British Ambassador Humphrys to Sir John Simon (Secretary of State, Foreign Office), Bagdad, 20 March 1934.

[194] CADN, 1SL/1/V/699, Lépissier (French *chargé d'affaires*) to the French High Commissioner, Baghdad, 29 April 1934; 'Requête de la compagnie Auto-Routière du Levant', attached to a letter from the French Legation in Iraq to the Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Baghdad 19 February 1938.

[195] TNA, FO 371/17829, British Ambassador Humphrys to Sir John Simon (Secretary of State, Foreign Office), Bagdad, 20 March 1934.

In the meantime, in early 1933, Haim Nathaniel approached the governments of Palestine and Transjordan, which were still under British Mandate administration. He asked for the same privileges enjoyed by the main companies operating between Baghdad and Damascus, namely customs exemption on vehicles, fuel, spare parts and so forth.[196] The latter did not immediately accept. In January 1934, Haim Nathaniel asked the British Embassy to urge the governments of Transjordan and Palestine to grant him the benefits that he was seeking.[197] In the following months, both governments agreed to Haim Nathaniel's demand.[198] Moreover, between March and April 1934, the Colonial Office and the British Mandate and local authorities in Palestine agreed on a series of measures modelled on those taken in the French Mandate states to support the companies operating on the Baghdad–Haifa route. They decided to grant various customs exemptions and reduced licensing fees to companies that met the following conditions: being registered in Palestine, having a paid up capital of at least 10,000 Palestinian pounds, having made a deposit of 5,000 Palestinian pounds with the government and operating at least two convoys per week between Iraq and Palestine.[199] Commenting on these measures in July 1934, the High Commissioner for Palestine admitted that without constituting a monopoly, they were intended to restrict government support to powerful companies in order to avoid competition from small transport contractors:

> The main object of the conditions imposed is to ensure that only substantial transport concerns operate along the trans-desert route, and to protect Government from the embarrassments which accompanied the opening up of the Baghdad-Damascus route by small taxi owners, etc., whose cars frequently broke down in the desert and had to be salvaged.[200]

On 16 July 1934, Haim Nathaniel and Colonel Dwyer inaugurated their passenger service between Baghdad and Haifa at a slightly lower fare than that charged by the Nairn Transport Company for the same journey via Damascus.[201]

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[196] ISA, Grant of facilities to Haim Nathaniel Vol.1: Minutes of meeting between the Max Nurock (Assistant Secretary, Treasurer of the Palestinian Government) and Haim Nathaniel regarding the Baghdad–Haifa desert motor route, held on 18 January 1933.
[197] ISA, Grant of facilities to Haim Nathaniel Vol.1: Haim Nathaniel to the British Embassy, Baghdad, 24 January 1934.
[198] ISA, Grant of facilities to Haim Nathaniel Vol.1: Wauchope (High Commissioner for Palestine) to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Jerusalem, 4 March 1933; TNA, CO 732/58/5, (most likely) the Colonial Office to the Foreign Office, Downing Street, London, 19 August 1933; TNA, CO 732/65/5, High Commissioner Wauchope to the Secretary of State of the Colonies, Jerusalem, 26 April 1934.
[199] TNA, CO 732/65/5, Wauchope to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Jerusalem, 26 April 1934; ISA, Grant of facilities to Haim Nathaniel Vol.2: Note from the Treasurer of the Palestinian Government, 13 March 1934.
[200] TNA, CO 732/65/6, Wauchope to an unknown recipient (named Philip), Jerusalem, 12 July 1934.
[201] ISA, Grant of facilities to Haim Nathaniel Vol.2: the British Embassy to Sir John Simon, Baghdad, 7 July 1934; TNA, FO 684/7/34/14, 'Baghdad to Haifa: The New Direct Service', *Iraq Times*, 27 July 1934.

In summary, the transport war of the early 1930s prompted the French and British authorities and local governments to implement a series of measures for promoting transdesert traffic on either route by increasing the benefits for transdesert carriers and reserving them solely for powerful companies. In view of the rivalry over the two transdesert routes, competition between transport companies was seen as a threat rather than an impetus to the development of traffic. Under these conditions, in the following years, the business of transport on the Baghdad–Damascus route was to become the preserve of three major transport companies, the Nairn Transport Company, Haim Nathaniel and a new company resulting from the merger of various Syrian and Iraqi companies.

The Giants of the Baghdad–Damascus Route

In the second half of the 1930s, competition between the concerned authorities over the two transdesert routes continued unabated. In a bid to promote the Baghdad–Damascus route, the French endeavoured to turn the desert track into a paved road. Work began in mid-1934 during the term of High Commissioner Damien de Martel, and the section from Damascus to Abu Shamat was almost complete by May 1935. Further east, the track was simply upgraded as far as the Iraqi border. In September 1935, the Iraqi government decided to build a paved road westwards from Ramadi on its territory. The PWD took charge of the first few kilometres and entrusted the remaining 50 kilometres to the contractor Hassan Makhzumi. By the end of 1936, the journey between Damascus and Baghdad could now be made in sixteen hours by touring cars and in twenty hours by Nairn Pullman coaches.[202] On the Haifa–Baghdad route, a paved road was not built until some years later. Work began in the summer of 1938 on the Palestinian and Transjordanian sections of the road with British funding provided by the Foreign Office and the War Office. In August 1940, the British also decided to finance the work on the Iraqi sections to speed up the process, while negotiating with the Iraqi government for repayment at a later date. The road was completed during the Second World War.[203] Besides these infrastructural development projects, competition over the two transdesert routes had a

[202] CADC, 50CPCOM580, Note attached to a letter from the French High Commissioner to the French Foreign Ministry, Beirut, 26 January 1934; CADC, 50CPCOM588, Note written by Lagarde (general delegate of the High Commissioner) to the French Foreign Ministry, Beirut, 21 May 1935; TNA, FO 371/18923, Memo on 'The Baghdad Damascus Desert Route' prepared by the commercial secretary of the British consulate, Baghdad, 12 December 1935; CADN, 1SL/1/V/716, French memo on 'Réfection et aménagements des routes', 15 July 1938.
[203] TNA, FO 371/20786, the Colonial Office to Bridges, London, 31 December 1936; Russell (the Air Ministry) to the Foreign Office, London, 25 November 1937; Middle-East Office Sub-Committee, Agenda for the 55th Meeting to be held on 6 January 1938.

profound impact on the transport sector, provoking an even stronger drive to reduce the number of competing companies in Baghdad and Damascus.

Passenger traffic: Sociétés Réunies de Transports Transdésertiques

On 11 August 1934, a contributor to *Le Commerce du Levant* claimed that the Syrian companies were too weak to stand up to the giants of transdesert transport, namely the Nairn Transport Company on the Baghdad–Damascus route and Haim Nathaniel on the Baghdad–Haifa route.[204] However, according to statistics on transdesert traffic, the Syrian and Iraqi companies proved remarkably resilient in the mid-1930s. The two largest of these companies, Debosh & Akkash and Sawaf & Seyada, carried over 500 passengers in October 1934, around 300 passengers in November 1934 and between 350 and 450 in December—volumes that gradually surpassed those of the Nairn Transport Company.[205] Around the same period, the French High Commissioner's delegate in Damascus noted that the Syrian companies introduced larger vehicles which enabled them 'to successfully withstand the competition from British-backed companies'.[206] However, the competition between the different local companies was evidently very harmful to them. In August 1935, Georges Pharès lamented in *Les Échos de Damas* that the 'small fish' of the transdesert traffic had to struggle with limited means against the 'big sharks' with considerable resources. While stressing the public's interest in having the government support these companies, he also laid the responsibility on the small entrepreneurs themselves. He regretted that the Syrian companies competed with each other instead of uniting and forming a 'common front' against the powerful companies.[207]

Fierce competition had prompted the Syrian and Lebanese transporters to reach an agreement in 1931 to prevent the lowering of fares to unprofitable rates, as mentioned earlier. This commitment to partnership was taken a step further in 1935. In the context of a new revision of their incentive regime, the French authorities insisted that local companies join forces and promised to grant them the benefits entailed in a new decree under discussion. In May 1935, the directors of five Syrian and Iraqi companies held a meeting to lay the foundations for a partnership structure that would end the competition between them. Kamel Debosh

[204] AUB, 'La route Caiffa–Bagdad: Un grave danger menace l'avenir de notre Commerce de Transit', *Le Commerce du Levant*, 11 August 1934, p. 1.
[205] CADN, 1SL/1/V/702, Monthly Statistics on Transdesert Traffic, *Sûreté Générale*, Beirut.
[206] CADN, 1SL/1/V/702, French delegate to High Commissioner Damien de Martel, Damascus, 12 July 1934; AUB, Achard (agronomic advisor to the Syrian Republic), 'Le trafic transdésertique', *Le Commerce du Levant*, 21 July 1934, p. 2.
[207] AUB, Georges Pharès, 'La route Caiffa-Bagdad', *Le Commerce du Levant*, 21 August 1934, p. 2 and 'Le transport transdésertique: le droit de vivre', *Le Commerce du Levant*, 29 September 1934, p. 2. Both articles were reproduced from *Les Échos de Damas*.

(Debosh & Akkash), Subhi Sawaf (Sawaf & Seyada), Adib Sha'ban (Shaban Transport Co.), Amin Shaykh Ogli (the Oriental National Company) and Mohammad al-Habbal (Habbal & Co.) decided to pool their resources together to form the Sociétés Réunies de Transports Transdésertiques et de Tourisme (hereinafter Sociétés Réunies) in early June 1935. In a letter dated 12 June 1935 and addressed to the French *chargé d'affaires* in Baghdad, they presented the merger of their companies as a response to the often-expressed wishes of the French authorities. The Sociétés Réunies, which owned 18 vehicles at the time of its inception, planned to provide passenger and freight transport between Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Iran. The agreement specified that although the contracting companies would retain ownership of their vehicles, they would no longer operate independently. Instead, it was decided that the overall traffic would be distributed among the different companies on a rotating basis, according to the conditions set by the board of directors. The number of shares in the Sociétés Réunies was set at 21 and distributed among the contracting companies according to their respective contributions, ranging from 3 ½ shares each for Habbal & Co. and the Oriental National Company to 5 ½ for Debosh & Akkash. The agreement specified that after deduction of overheads and expenses, 21% of the revenues would be deposited in a bank in Damascus, constituting the capital of the Sociétés Réunies, and the remainder would be distributed among the five contracting companies according to their shares.[208]

From their inception, the Sociétés Réunies sought greater protection from the French, demanding full exemption from customs duties on cars and a subsidy of sixty francs per passenger carried for the sole benefit of the Nairn Transport Company and themselves. In addition, they insisted that the benefits of Decree 89/LR should be granted only to companies transporting 10,000 passengers per year (instead of 2,000) and that any new company wishing to operate on the Baghdad–Damascus route should be required to deposit a guarantee of at least 500,000 francs.[209] Now that they had agreed to join forces, the Syrian and Iraqi companies did not want to face competition from newcomers. Notably, the demands of the Sociétés Réunies were in alignment with the decree on which the French were working.

As early as June 1935, various departments of the French High Commission expressed discontent with the outcome of Decrees 89/LR and 28/LR. A lengthy report from the customs department exposed the failure of these two decrees to facilitate the movement of passengers

[208] CADN, 1SL/1/V/702, Sociétés Réunies de Transport Transdésertique et de Tourisme to the French *chargé d'affaires* in Iraq, Baghdad, 12 June 1935, together with the agreement; AUB, 'Sharikāt al-naql fī ṭarīq Baghdād', *Al-Qabas*, 7 May 1935, p. 4.
[209] CADN, 1SL/1/V/702, 'Propositions des Sociétés Réunies de Transports Transdésertiques', attached to the above letter of 12 June 1935.

and goods through the French Mandate states. Regarding passenger traffic, the report recommended, first of all, stronger measures to limit competition between transdesert carriers by making customs benefits conditional on the deposit of a large sum as a bank guarantee and by introducing a system of transport licences.[210] A new decree was issued on 26 September 1935, which abolished the existing system of incentives for transdesert carriers. To simplify matters, Decree 221/LR applied to both goods and passenger traffic. It also introduced a flat-rate refund of customs duties, which turned out to be more generous than pre-existing customs exemptions. And most importantly, the decree stipulated new conditions, which drastically restricted the number of beneficiaries. To access these benefits, companies needed to hold a transport license, which was granted by the PWD solely on the basis of 'traffic needs'. Finally, they had to make a deposit of 30,000 Syrian pounds in a bank.[211]

Although the new decree did not halt the operation of unlicensed companies, it increased indirect subsidies for large companies and, above all, gave the authorities the possibility of denying these privileges to newly established companies, even though they fulfilled the requirements. By the time the decree was issued, the Nairn Transport Company and the Sociétés Réunies were the main companies transporting passengers between Beirut and Baghdad. In early October, the Sociétés Réunies lodged the required guarantee, applied for the provisions of the new decree and soon gained admission as a license holder alongside the Nairn Transport Company. As pointed out in the correspondence of the Department for the Control of Concessionary Companies and Public Works in December 1935, these licenses did not give their holders a monopoly; rather, they gave them certain advantages, enabling them to adjust their fares in order to 'eliminate the competition they face[d] in a short time.'[212]

Yet the industry of transdesert transport remained vibrant. Although the merger of the five Syrian and Iraqi companies reduced the number of transport operators between Baghdad and Damascus, new companies emerged around the same period, jeopardizing the balance sought by the French authorities and the main transport companies. At the end of May 1935, another company was established in Damascus and Baghdad by three partners: Khalil Namo, 'Abd al-Hamid Kharfan and Mohammad Taha Mussulli. Khalil Namo was a former employee

[210] CADN, 1SL/1/V/702, Note written by French Inspector General of Customs, Beirut, 1 June 1935.
[211] Decree 221/LR, *Bulletin des actes administratifs du Haut-Commissariat*, 26 September 1935. https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6470765v/f4.item (accessed 27 March 2022). See also TNA, FO 371/19022, the quarterly report of the British consulate, Damascus, 1 July to 30 September 1935; TNA, FO 371/18922, British Consul Mackereth to Sir Samuel Hoare, Damascus, 7 October 1935.
[212] CADN, 1SL/1/V/702, Sociétés Réunies to the delegate of the High Commissioner in Damascus, Damascus, 3 October 1935; Note from the customs department of the High Commission, Beirut, 17 October 1935; Note from the Department for Control of Concessionary Companies and Public Works, Beirut, 30 December 1935.

of Debosh & Akkash who had resigned after a dispute over the compensation he received for the Baghdad–Beirut trip. The three entrepreneurs founded the Iraq Transport Company, which owned a total of approximately twenty coaches and trucks. The creation of this company alarmed the French, especially as it started its activity on a high note. Between June and October 1935, the Iraqi company carried between 400 and 600 passengers per month between Baghdad and Damascus and vice versa, as compared to between 800 and 1,000 passengers conveyed by the Sociétés Réunies during the same period.[213]

The Sociétés Réunies and the Nairn Transport Company requested that this new company be banned from operating. However, the French High Commission was not in a position to grant this request. The Sociétés Réunies therefore entered into negotiations with the Iraq Transport Company to find a way to combine forces. Eventually, the new company was amalgamated with the Sociétés Réunies, which now comprised six contracting companies. The newly established regime of incentives for transdesert carriers proved effective in pushing local companies to pool their interests. Nonetheless, competition was not completely contained. In November 1935, the Sociétés Réunies learned that an Iraqi entrepreneur, Mohammad Hassan, was planning to establish a transport company under the name of Rafidain. They expressed their concern to the French, saying that their company was now supporting 150 families and could not afford any more competition. Moreover, they could not continue to merge with all of the newly formed companies.[214] The Rafidain Company was launched in the spring of 1936 and carried passengers regularly throughout the following years (Figure 12).

The new regime of incentives for transdesert carriers certainly bore fruit. In January 1937, Norman Nairn wrote to the High Commissioner, informing him that the benefits his company had enjoyed since 1935 had enabled it to recover from a precarious situation, so much so that 1936 marked the year for the highest volume of traffic in its history.[215] For their part, the Sociétés Réunies experienced further upheaval during the second half of the 1930s. One of the key contributing events was undoubtedly their temporary break-up with Debosh & Akkash in mid-1936, as indicated by a document stored at the National Library in Jordan. This document is a transport ticket for two passengers who travelled from Baghdad to Damascus with the Sociétés Réunies on 10 June 1936, on which the name 'Debosh & Akkash' is crossed

[213] CADN, 1SL/1/V/702, Abd al-Hamid Kharfan (Iraq Transport Company) to Mr Lobbe, Damascus, 27 May 1935; Note from the Department for Control of Concessionary Companies and Public Works, Beirut, 12 September 1935; monthly statistics on transdesert traffic, *Sûreté Générale*, Beirut.
[214] CADN, 1SL/1/V/702, the Sociétés Réunies to the French High Commissioner, Beirut, 20 December 1935.
[215] CADN, 1SL/1/V/702, Norman Nairn to High Commissioner de Martel, Damascus, 18 January 1937.

out.[216] This evidence of a rupture coincides with French statistics on transdesert traffic, which indicate a separate line of figures for Debosh & Akkash in addition to that for the Sociétés Réunies between June and August 1936.[217] Furthermore, in April, the French received an individual application from Debosh & Akkash for a transport licence under the terms of Decree 221/LR, which they refused to grant.[218] These elements suggest that the split between the two companies lasted for a period of about three months.

Furthermore, at the end of April 1936, six associates founded the Zelouf Transport Company in Baghdad, with the main shareholder being Yehuda Zelouf, an Iraqi merchant. The company was registered in Iraq in April and in Syria in June, before it applied to the French High Commission to be admitted as a licensed company for transporting passengers and freight. Once again, the French responded that the services of the Nairn Transport Company and the Sociétés Réunies were sufficient to 'satisfy the needs of the clientele', with the former offering a service costing between £5 and £6 and the latter charging between £1½ and £2. Accordingly, they decided to refuse the application of the Zelouf Transport Company.[219] Despite not being licensed, the company continued to develop its freight and passenger traffic in the following years. The Sociétés Réunies nonetheless retained a clear advantage by being one of only two companies, with the Nairn Transport Company, licensed to carry passengers. They managed to hold on to this position and maintain a great share of the traffic between Beirut and Baghdad, as indicated by French statistics on transdesert traffic (Figure 12).[220] In fact, the Sociétés Réunies continued their operations long after the end of the French Mandate in Syria.[221]

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[216] The National Library, Amman, Jordan: 'Tadhkirat safar: al-sharikāt al-muttaḥida li-l-naqlīyāt wa-l-safarīyāt mā warā' al-ṣaḥrā'.
[217] CADN, 1SL/1/V/702, Monthly Statistics on Transdesert Traffic, *Sûreté Générale*, Beirut.
[218] CADN, 1SL/1/V/702, Note from the Department for Control of Concessionary Companies and Public Works, Beirut, 8 September 1936.
[219] ISA, Zelouf Transport Company: the British Embassy to the High Commissioner for Palestine, Baghdad, 20 June 1936; CADN, 1SL/1/V/702, the Minister of France to the delegate general of the High Commissioner, Baghdad, 18 June 1936 as well as a note from the Department for Control of Concessionary Companies and Public Works, 8 September 1936; 'Récepissé No. 92'; *Bulletin des actes administratifs du Haut-Commissariat* [Gallica] https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6471014f/f27.image.r=transports (accessed 28 March 2022).
[220] CADN, 1SL/1/V/702, Monthly Statistics on Transdesert Traffic by Company, *Sûreté Générale*, Beirut.
[221] A report published by the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development in 1951 indicated that six companies shared passenger and freight traffic across the desert: Nairn, Rafidain, Angurly, United Company for Transdesert Transport, Nathaniel and Levant Express: The World Bank, Documents & Reports: 'Syrian Transportation Problems', Grace W. Fine (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development), 20 April 1951.
https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/130101468304869515/syrian-transportation-problems (accessed 28 March 2022).

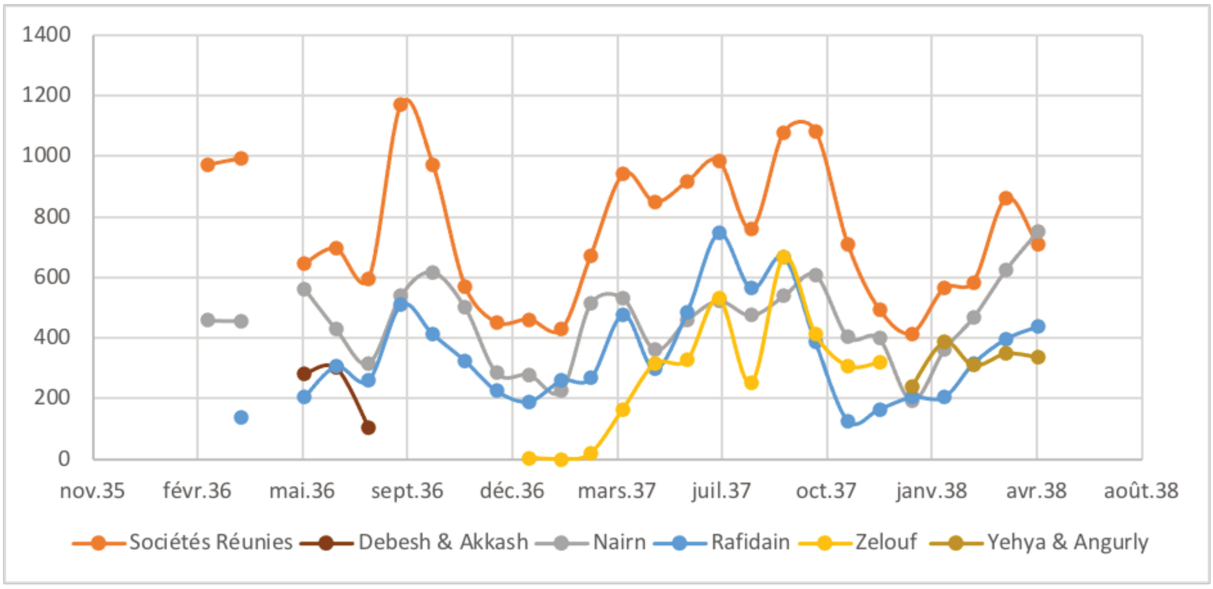

FIGURE 12: PASSENGER TRAFFIC ON THE BAGHDAD–DAMASCUS ROUTE

Freight traffic: Haim Nathaniel

Freight traffic on the Baghdad–Damascus route continued to expand up to 1934. In that year, Haim Nathaniel still held a leading position, accounting for 55.26% of the traffic, followed by AR, which grew steadily throughout the year, capturing 21.18% of the traffic and finally by the Nairn Transport Company with a 19.82% share of the traffic.[222] However, towards the end of 1934 and during the first few months of 1935, traffic showed a steady decline, even more in terms of value than in terms of tonnage. The French attributed this decline partly to the global economic crisis but mainly to the diversion of traffic by Haim Nathaniel towards Haifa.[223] A snapshot of traffic on the two transdesert routes in June 1935 provided by Bill Fraser, the manager of the Rutbah Hotel, shows that traffic on the Bagdad–Haifa route was significant. That month, sixty-one trucks travelled from Baghdad to Palestine (carrying mainly fish, chickens, eggs and skins) and twenty-two travelled to Syria; in the reverse direction, forty-one trucks travelled from Palestine to Baghdad (there were an additional twenty-six empty trucks) and forty-two trucks made the trip from Syria to Baghdad.[224]

In this context, the French discussed new ways to stimulate freight on the Baghdad–Damascus route and induce Haim Nathaniel to bring his traffic back on that route. To this end, in April 1935 they abolished transit duties, which had been lowered from 0.5% to 0.1% in

[222] TNA, FO 684/8/35/14, Note on 'Trafic transdésertique', transmitted to British Consul Mackereth by the French delegate of the High Commissioner in Damascus.
[223] CADN, 1SL/1/V/702, Note from the French Inspector General of Customs, Beirut, 1 June 1935; TNA, FO 371/20069, Annual Economic Report on Syria and Lebanon for 1935 and the beginning of 1936, transmitted by the British consulate to the Department of Overseas Trade, Beirut, 25 June 1936.
[224] TNA, FO 684/8/35/14, Note from Bill Fraser (hotel manager, Rutbah), 6 May 1935.

February 1932 but still generated burdensome formalities that hampered trade on the Syrian route.[225] Furthermore, they worked on reforming the entire system of incentives for freight carriers. In June, the customs department of the French High Commission stated that the previous legislation (Decree 28/LR) had had a counterproductive effect by forcing freight forwarders to transport their goods from Beirut to Damascus by rail in order to avail of the benefits associated with the international transit regime. By contrast, goods arriving at the port of Haifa were loaded directly onto trucks bound for Iraq and further east. In other words, the decree had created additional transfer and customs operations, which deprived the Baghdad–Damascus route of its main asset: speed.[226]

Moreover, Haim Nathaniel made his good will conditional on the French accepting his criticism of the AR. In July 1935, he claimed that the company benefited from a 'disguised subsidy' which undermined 'the game of competition', as its losses were always absorbed by the DHP and consequently by the common budget of the French Mandate states, the so-called *Intérêts Communs*.[227] Haim Nathaniel told the French that he had so far diverted about 90% of his traffic to the Baghdad–Haifa route, even though the cost of plying this route was 30% higher. He asked that the competition from the AR be removed; in turn, he would agree to shift his traffic back to the Baghdad–Damascus route.[228] The political and economic contexts in the French Mandate states at the time were favourable for the fulfilment of his demands. In the early 1930s, numerous strikes by artisans, workers and drivers were organised in the main cities of Lebanon and Syria in reaction to the dire economic situation, and many boycotts and protests against the privileges of the concessionary companies also occurred.[229] This context was

[225] CADN, 1SL/1/V/699, Note from Reclus (economic affairs advisor to the High Commission), Beirut, 4 April 1934; the French High Commissioner to the French *chargé d'affaires* in Baghdad, Beirut, 17 May 1934; Decree 90/LR, 24 April 1935.

[226] CADN, 1SL/1/V/702, Note from the French Inspector General of Customs, Beirut, 1 June 1935. Other departments considered that the requirement for freight forwarders to use the railroad between Beirut and Damascus should be removed: CADN, 1SL/1/V/702, Note from the Department for Control of Concessionary Companies and Public Works, Beirut, 24 June 1935.

[227] Edmond Chidiac, 'Les intérêts communs syro-libanais', in Nadine Méouchy (ed.), *France, Syrie et Liban, 1918-1946 : les ambiguïtés et les dynamiques de la relation mandataire* (Damas: Institut français d'études arabes de Damas, 2002), pp. 259-271; Mohammed Ali El-Saleh, 'Une évaluation de la gestion mandataire de l'économie syrienne', in Nadine Méouchy and Peter Sluglett (eds.), *The British and French Mandates in Comparative Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), pp. 385–413.

[228] CADN, 1SL/1/V/702, Note from Soulé Susbielle (customs department of the High Commission), Beirut, 24 July 1935.

[229] Jacques Couland, *Le mouvement syndical au Liban 1919-1946* (Paris: Editions sociales, 1970), pp. 181–199; Carla Eddé, 'La mobilisation populaire à Beyrouth à l'époque du Mandat (1918–1943): l'apprentissage progressif de la participation', in Nadine Méouchy and Peter Sluglett (eds.), *The British and French Mandates in Comparative Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), pp. 623–648; Simon Jackson, 'Mandatory Development'; Geoffrey D. Schad, 'Colonial Corporatism in the French Mandated States: Labor, Capital, the Mandatory Power, and the 1935 Syrian Law of Associations', *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* No. 105/106 (2015), pp. 201–219.

detrimental to the AR, which already had a very bad reputation among the public because of the many accidents involving its cars.[230] Between late 1932 and early 1933, Lebanese and Syrian drivers, garage owners and car importers organised strikes and denounced the privileged relationship between the AR and DHP companies, stating that it created unfair competition. It also appeared that the AR was receiving its fuel directly from the French Army without paying duties. The local press relayed the criticism and forced the French to take action. Some of the demands were quickly met, but the AR continued to enjoy certain privileges and to collaborate with the DHP; an issue that was raised again in August 1934 and was a key instigating factor behind other drivers' strikes between 1935 and 1936.[231]

At the end of 1935, the French backtracked on their earlier measures and took steps to bring Haim Nathaniel back to Syria. Decree 221/LR, issued in September 1935, removed the obligation for freight forwarders to use the railway between Beirut and Damascus and required freight transporters to carry at least 2,500 tonnes per year to apply for a license.[232] In addition, they worked to conclude a new 'gentleman's agreement' on sharing the transdesert goods traffic, which was accepted by Haim Nathaniel and the AR in early 1936. The AR would henceforth concentrate on traffic along the northern route (between Alexandretta and Mosul), using a combination of road and rail transport. Haim Nathaniel agreed to pay the AR a subsidy of thirty francs per tonne transported on the Baghdad–Damascus route, in return for the drastic reduction of its operations on this route. Haim Nathaniel now enjoyed a free reign on the Baghdad–Damascus route and was the only freight carrier to benefit from the advantages of Decree 221/LR, as no other company was able to transport 2,500 tonnes of goods annually. By their own admission, the French had no choice but to give full support to Haim Nathaniel to retain his services in Syria; his was the only well-organised freight carrier with significant resources and a strong foothold in Syria, Iraq and Iran.[233] Making the most of his special status,

[230] TNA, FO 371/16010, British Consul Monck-Mason to the Foreign Office, Aleppo, 31 March 1932; 'La Compagnie Auto-Routière', *Les Échos de Damas* No. 58, 4 April 1931, p. 1. [gallica.fr] and 'L'affaire de la Société Auto-Routière', *Les Échos de Damas* No. 99, 16 June 1931, p. 2. [gallica.fr] (accessed 25 February 2022).
[231] AUB, 'L'Auto-Routière contre l'industrie locale du transport', *Le Commerce du Levant*, 28 September 1932, p. 1; TNA, FO 371/16976, British Consul Satow to Sir John Simon, Beirut, 17 March 1933; CADC, 50CPCOM588, High Commissioner Ponsot to the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, Beirut, 24 March 1933; AUB, 'Le transport transdésertique: le droit de vivre', *Le Commerce du Levant*, 29 September 1934, p. 2; 'Munāwarāt sayyarāt Ṭuruq al-sharq', *Al-Sha'b*, 29 January 1935, p. 3; CADC, 50CPCOM500, High Commissioner de Martel to the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, Beirut, 12 April 1935. See also Mari Oiry, 'Transports et société au Liban sous Mandat français' (MA thesis, ENS Lyon, 2005), pp. 135–146.
[232] Decree 221/LR, *Bulletin des actes administratifs du Haut-Commissariat*, 26 September 1935. https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6470765v/f4.item (accessed 27 March 2022).
[233] CADN, 1SL/1/V/702, Note from Soulé Susbielle (customs department), Beirut, 31 July 1935 and attached note written by Reclus (economic affairs advisor); Note on international transit from the department of economic affairs of the French High Commission, Beirut, 15 July 1937; CADC, 50CPCOM460, Lépissier (Minister of France) to the French High Commissioner, Baghdad, 13 February 1936.

Haim Nathaniel acquired a strong hold on the goods traffic during the years 1936–1937, achieving a *de facto* monopoly.[234] Statistics on transdesert traffic show that the monthly volume of goods transported by the AR oscillated between 100 and 200 tonnes up to April 1926, before falling thereafter to figures that varied between ten and fifty tonnes per month. Between 1936 and 1939, Haim Nathaniel faced little competition (Figure 13).

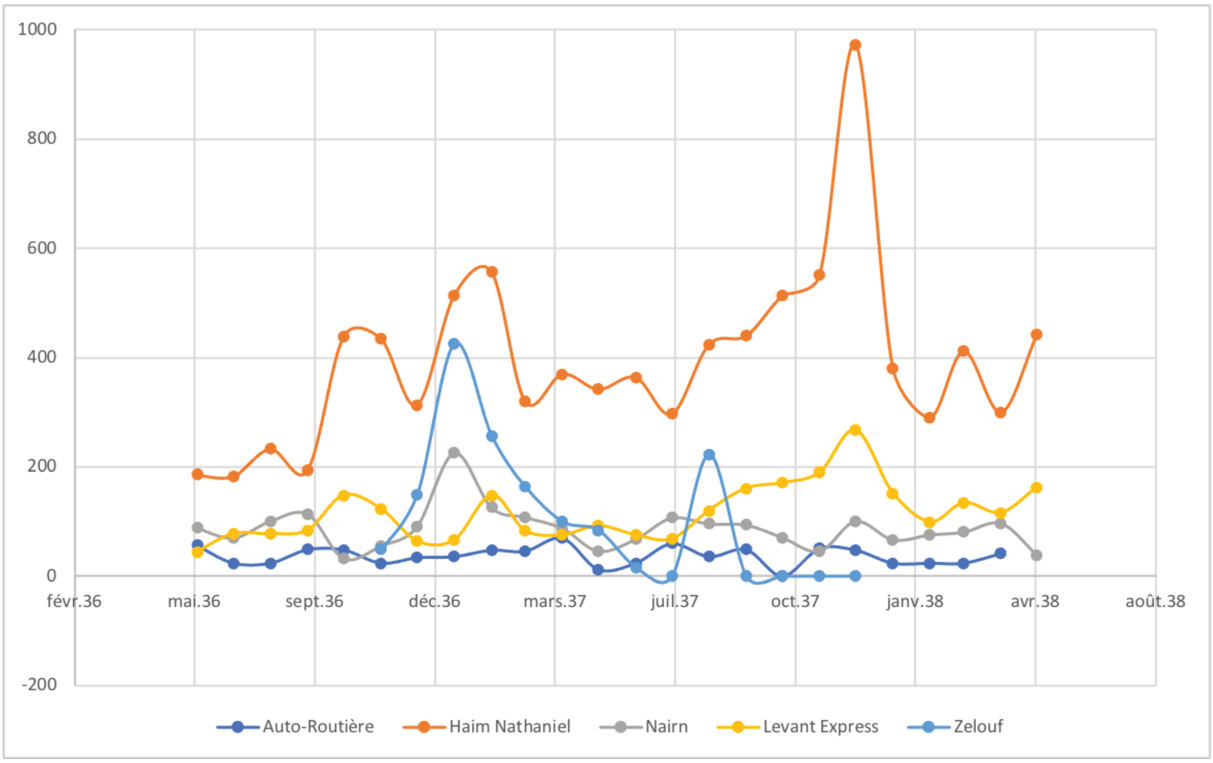

FIGURE 13: GOODS TRAFFIC ON THE BAGHDAD–DAMASCUS ROUTE

During the second half of the 1930s, the French protected Haim Nathaniel's position by denying the benefits of Decree 221/LR to other transporters, notably the Levant Express Transport Company. Registered in Beirut in early 1931, this company had attracted French, Syrian and Lebanese shareholders. It operated as an international freight forwarder, serving as an intermediary between shippers and buyers and transporting goods across numerous countries thanks to its collaborations with sister companies and subsidiaries in Lebanon, Syria and Iran but also in Europe and the United States.[235] In October 1936, the company transported 148 tonnes of goods between Baghdad and Damascus, which was far from being a negligible amount but too little to enjoy the benefits of Decree 221/LR. Therefore, the Levant Express

[234] CADN, 1SL/1/V/702, 'Note sur le transit Damas-Bagdad' of June 1937, attached to a letter from the French High Commissioner to the French Foreign Minister, Beirut, 3 December 1937.
[235] AUB, 'Levant Express Transport', *Le Commerce du Levant*, 13 February 1931, p. 2; 'Circulaire : Levant Express Transport', *Le Commerce du Levant*, 6 March 1931, p. 2.

Transport Company repeatedly asked the French High Commission to lower the minimum annual tonnage required from 2,500 tonnes to 500–700 tonnes. The economic affairs department of the High Commission noted that the decree was aimed at avoiding 'disorderly competition' and considered that no company would be able to handle as much traffic as Haim Nathaniel was able to if a revision of the arrangements led the latter to abandon Syria. The department recognised that in the longer term, the French would have to find a way to break free from the 'tutelage of a foreign transport company',[236] especially as they could not remain deaf to the mounting criticism in the local press against arrangements that seemed to benefit mainly foreign companies.[237] The issue was debated within the French High Commission in late 1937. Some individuals considered the regime to be detrimental to local and French companies and were in favour of reducing the tonnage required for licensing. In the end, however, the High Commissioner decided to maintain the benefits only for the Iraqi freight carrier, Haim Nathaniel.[238]

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the dynamic and rapidly shifting sector of transdesert transport on the Baghdad–Damascus route, which attracted the interests of many state and non-state actors in the interwar years and underwent significant changes in response to internal influences (high competition and enterprising transport operators) and external influences (government interventions and competition from a new route). The transport entrepreneurs who engaged in the business of transport between Damascus and Baghdad for various periods of time all contributed in their own way to the operation of the transport system. But they were also its primary beneficiaries. The approximately 1,500 passengers per month in the late 1920s, not counting mail and goods, represented an important source of income for many entrepreneurial families. During the interwar period, the Baghdad–Damascus route constituted a commercial space in which enterprising foreign and local capitalists seized opportunities to make a profit. In particular, this chapter has highlighted the undertakings of a group of middle-class Arab entrepreneurs who developed distinct forms of commercial motorised transport across territorial and imperial borders. By developing economic activities across multiple

[236] CADN, 1SL/1/V/702, Note on international transit written by the French High Commission's department of economic affairs, Beirut, 15 July 1937.
[237] See, for example, AUB, Jean Suy, 'Beyrouth-Damas-Bagdad: Artère de l'Orient', *Le Commerce du Levant*, 25 June 1937, pp. 1, 4.
[238] CADN, 1SL/1/V/702, 'De la règlementation du transit Beyrouth-Damas-Bagdad', 28 October 1937, author unknown; the French High Commissioner to the French Foreign, Beirut, 3 December 1937.

jurisdictions, establishing branches in several Mandate states and setting up transnational collaborations as in the case of the Sociétés Réunies, these entrepreneurs envisaged and exploited the post-Ottoman space as a regional ground for economic expansion, while taking into account the constraints and opportunities arising from national and imperial economic policies. As will be seen in the next chapter, the same entrepreneurs who formed the Sociétés Réunies would expand their business horizons in the mid-1930s by exploring a new route between Syria and the Hijaz. For his part, the Iraqi Jewish entrepreneur Haim Nathaniel managed to capture a tremendous share of the transdesert freight traffic by capitalising on a privileged relationship with the Iraqi Railways, but also on his connections to Iraqi and British high officials. He also exploited the Franco–British rivalry and succeeded in establishing his company on both the Baghdad–Damascus and Baghdad–Haifa routes, gradually gaining a foothold in Palestine as well.

The state's implication in the business of transdesert transport assumed many forms and entailed the pursuit of various objectives. Initially, the Mandate powers sought to gain control over the first transport companies by granting them postal contracts and customs exemptions. In addition, the process of increasing capital offered a way for the Nairn and Kettaneh brothers to strengthen their companies and secure the support of the French and British Mandate authorities; it also provided a way for the latter to advance their interests in the transport sector. As we have seen, imperial designs and rivalries had a considerable impact on the business of transdesert transport. They channelled the support of the Mandate authorities to certain companies and pushed the French and British in the 1930s to compete by means of increasingly substantial but also increasingly restricted customs exemptions and subsidies. Ultimately, the opening of the Baghdad–Haifa route certainly diverted less traffic than expected from the Baghdad–Damascus route, but the rivalry associated with the two transdesert routes made the transport business even more uncertain and challenging for entrepreneurs. Moreover, the 'transport war' encouraged the expansion of three large state-sponsored companies, which shared the vast majority of passenger and goods traffic between Baghdad, Damascus and Beirut across the Syrian Desert.

That said, the chapter has also shown that transport politics was not solely attributable to the Mandate and post-Mandate states; it was also shaped by the demands and actions of local and foreign entrepreneurs who managed to advance their interests. By providing services tailored to the needs of the governments, pointing out the danger that their failure would pose to transdesert traffic and threatening to divert their cars onto another route, the companies were able to influence the economic policies of the post-Ottoman states. In many cases, these

companies proved to be proactive, for example by suggesting new regulations that would better protect them from competition. Moreover, the growth of Lebanese, Syrian and Iraqi transport companies altered the goals and plans of those in power. Initially perceived by the French and British representatives of the Mandate states as at best being unfit for the development of transdesert traffic and at worst being detrimental to the transport sector, local companies succeeded in establishing themselves as central players in transdesert transport. Beyond individual failures, the local companies as a whole proved capable of offering competitive transport services, exploiting Franco–British rivalry, capturing the majority of passenger and freight traffic and consequently becoming licensed companies.

By ending this first part with the transport business, this chapter initiated a shift in focus towards the appropriation of the new transport system by individuals. Having examined the use of transport for commercial purposes, the chapters in Part II will examine its adoption for travel purposes. The second part of this dissertation focuses on the varied and uneven movements of people and goods across spaces overlapping with the Syrian Desert, investigating in a similar way who appropriated and benefited from the new travel opportunities and examining the interactions between mobility and space in the post-Ottoman context of globalisation, regionalisation and state territorialisation.

Part II – Mobility, Border and Space

As Part I has shown, the development of the Baghdad–Damascus route resulted in a substantial degree of intensification of transdesert mobility during the interwar period. At the same time, the transport system remained subject to frequent disruptions due to rain, floods and highway robbers as well as to severe restrictions imposed by the authorities—all of which generated numerous obstacles, slowdowns and dangers. Having closely examined the growth, speed and material conditions of transdesert mobility in Part I of this dissertation, in Part II, I will delve more deeply into the nature of such movements. The steady decline in fares, described in the previous chapter, suggests a gradual expansion of access to travel. But the question remains as to who were the people who actually travelled across the Syrian Desert and what forms of movement occurred. Part II looks more specifically at the practices and forms of mobility—both new and pre-existing forms diverted from earlier routes—that unfolded along the Baghdad–Damascus route. Evidently, the development of this route transformed the travel geographies of long-distance movements and offered the possibility of new destinations for the inhabitants of Lebanon, Syria and Iraq. The chapters in this second part trace the development of the Syrian Desert into a space of intense circulation but also one encompassing diverse forms of mobility, specifically pilgrimage, tourism, summering, scouting, official trips, study trips, labour mobility and migration.

New protagonists appear in Part II. Firstly, there are individual and collective actors who seized the new travel opportunities and embarked on short and long journeys between Lebanon, Syria and Iraq and beyond these countries to other destinations. Secondly, there are those who encouraged such travel. Indeed, the new opportunities to cross the Syrian Desert did not simply set individuals in motion; the work of 'intermediaries' was required to get them on the road. The development of the Baghdad–Damascus route went hand in hand with efforts made by various actors to market transdesert travel and turn certain places into attractive sites.[1] Tourism agencies capitalised on the development of transdesert traffic, as did transport companies and governments. Journalists and intellectuals also played an active role in informing the public about the new possibilities and arousing the desire to travel. The travellers

[1] Quote: Laurent Tissot, 'Développement des transports et tourisme: quelles relations ?', *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Geschichte* 56:1 (2006), pp. 31–37. On the commercialisation of tourism and travel in general, see Philip Scranton and Janet F. Davidson (eds.), *The Business of Tourism: Place, Faith, and History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

themselves helped to promote transdesert travel, either by word of mouth or by publishing accounts of their journeys. This second part also explores the motivations, experiences and perceptions of travel of the travellers.[2] At times, the chapters zoom in on an individual, following them on their journey. The experiences of travellers and migrants, sometimes conveyed in travel narratives and sometimes reflected in institutional sources (and thus mediated through the administrators' gaze) shall be examined to provide information on the concrete implications of border crossing. Finally, state authorities continue to feature in Part II. Following my examination of the impact of the transport system and its operations on transdesert mobility, in this second part, I investigate how this mobility was affected by the process of state formation and border making. What formalities were travellers subject to when crossing the desert and the Syrian–Iraqi border? To what extent did the authorities' management of cross-border mobility affect the movement of people and goods between Syria and Iraq, and beyond?

Finally, and most importantly, this second part examines how transdesert mobility reshaped the connectivity of the Syrian Desert region and influenced the spatial and territorial transformations that occurred in the post-Ottoman Middle East. As Part I has shown, the development of the Baghdad–Damascus route fostered interactions between the new states of Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, which sometimes took the form of collaboration, as when state officials and administrators on the ground cooperated to achieve the common goal of fast, smooth and safe mobility across the desert. However, they sometimes also took the form competition or conflict, as when Franco-British rivalry was rekindled by the development of the Baghdad–Haifa route in the 1930s. The Baghdad–Damascus route also produced other forms of interaction, for example, some Syrian and Iraqi entrepreneurs chose to join forces in 1935 in order to overcome competition and the French politics of incentives. Either way, these cooperative and competitive interactions show that the development of the Baghdad–Damascus route led to the intertwining of the three states of Lebanon, Syria and Iraq and in some ways tied together the two sides of the Syrian Desert. The following chapters look more closely at how movements between Baghdad and Damascus transformed transdesert connectivity by creating regional and transregional connections as well as through their interactions with and influence on the process of state territorialisation.

[2] Travel narratives are useful in this regard, as they reflect the ways in which travellers 'make sense of themselves and the worlds through which they move.' See Roxanne L. Euben, *Journeys to the Other Shore: Muslim and Western Travelers in Search of Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 9–10.

This second part begins by examining the interplay between mobility and state formation. Chapter 4 examines how the Syrian–Iraqi border was formed and consolidated in the interwar period in interplay with, and in response to, the growth of various forms of transdesert mobility. Chapter 5 investigates how the Baghdad–Damascus route became a 'global crossroads', that is, a transit route for a variety of mobilities extending transregionally. Finally, I examine the extent to which the Baghdad–Damascus route forged new interactions between the western and eastern sides of the Syrian Desert and knitted together a regional space. A region, as Cyrus Schayegh reminds us, 'does not simply exist *per se*; it exists in that it functions as a region. It is not a unit; rather, it is constituted by sets of relationships, each fueled by a particular driving force.'[3] Chapter 6 investigates the extent to which transdesert travel shaped (and was appropriated in efforts to shape) interactions that to some extent were formative of a regional space, understood here primarily as a transnational space that was both imagined and experienced by those on the move. Ultimately, I suggest that although the post-Ottoman space was reshaped into national territories during the interwar period, other spaces coexisted and overlapped with it. This second part explores how and the what extent the practices of transdesert mobility contributed to the emergence of a regional space spanning the Syrian Desert, which was embedded within transregional mobility networks.

[3] Cyrus Schayegh, 'Regions and Global History: An Arab-Iranian Case Study and Three Observations', *Journal of Levantine Studies* 10:1 (2020), p. 26.

Chapter 4 – Monitored Corridors and a Permeable Border

Introduction

On 29 March 1932, Munif al-Husayni, a Palestinian journalist and the editor-in-chief of the Jerusalem newspaper *Al-Jami'a al-'Arabiyya*, left Damascus for Baghdad in a convoy operated by Debosh & Akkash. The convoy crossed the desert after a few hours' drive and reached Rutbah just as a violent storm was erupting. Al-Husayni was on his way from Jerusalem to Baghdad, where he had been invited by the Iraqi government to attend an agricultural and industrial fair. In a story that was published in his newspaper, he recounted that although the desert journey took him and his companions from Syria to Iraq, the border remained invisible to them. After a couple of hours, they reached a hill called 'al-Tenf' situated in the middle of a 'black volcanic terrain', which, as they were told by the driver, was the territorial border between Syria and Iraq. Yet there was nothing to attest to this border.[1] Coincidentally, James de Reynier, a Swiss colonel and chairman of the League of Nations' boundary commission charged with delineating the Syrian–Iraqi border, left Damascus by plane the same morning for Baghdad, where the rest of the commission awaited him. Despite alerts sent by the Rutbah wireless station, the plane took off and was caught in the same storm, causing it to crash in the desert.[2] While sheltering in Rutbah, Munif al-Husayni learned of the accident that killed Colonel de Reynier, the pilot and the mechanic.[3]

The intertwining of these two stories in the opening paragraph of this chapter serves as a reminder that at the beginning of 1932, the Syrian–Iraqi border was (still) not definitively delineated or demarcated on the ground.[4] As explained in the Introduction to this dissertation, the first agreements on the provisional delimitation of the Syrian–Iraqi border date back to the negotiations between Faysal's Arab forces and the British forces in 1919. These negotiations were followed by a convention between the French and British authorities in 1920 that

[1] The National Library of Israel, 'Bayna al-Quds wa Baghdād: Min Dimashq ilā al-Ruṭba (2)', *Al-Jami'a al-'Arabiyya*, 10 April 1932, p. 1. https://jrayed.org/en/newspapers/home (accessed 20 May 2022).
[2] LON, R2348/6A/36215/32587, Commission of Enquiry on Delimitation of the Frontier between Iraq and Syria, Appendix to the Report of 1 April 1932 of the Iraq–Syria Border Study Commission.
[3] The National Library of Israel, 'Bayna al-Quds wa Baghdād: Min Dimashq ilā al-Ruṭba (3)', *Al-Jami'a al-'Arabiyya*, 11 April 1932, p. 1. https://jrayed.org/en/newspapers/home (accessed 20 May 2022). According to the border commission report (see footnote above), the High Commissioner for Iraq received a telegram from Rutbah on the evening of 29 March stating that a Bedouin had arrived in Rutbah with the news that he had seen a plane fall in the morning.
[4] For further references to the absence of physical borders in travelogues, see 'Abd al-Wahhab 'Azzam, *Riḥlāt* (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-risāla, 1939), p. 35; Joe Mitchell Chapple, *To Bagdad and Back* (New York: The Century Co, 1928), p. 63; Georges Le Fèvre, *La Croisière Jaune* (Paris: Plon, 1933), p. 11.

provisionally defined the borders between their mandated territories. Thereafter, the final delineation of the Syrian–Iraqi border was postponed until the borders of Syria and Iraq with Turkey were delimited, but also delayed due to disagreements. The League of Nations eventually set up a demarcation commission at the request of the two Mandate states, which carried out its survey in 1932. Following the death of Colonel de Reynier, the commission quickly resumed its mission under a newly appointed chair, Frédéric Iselin, also a Swiss colonel. The commission members began their fieldwork on 3 April 1932 in the vicinity of Jebel Tenf, following the provisional border.[5] The commission's proposals were accepted by the Council of the League of Nations on 30 October 1932, a few weeks after Iraq attained formal independence, and a demarcation commission was sent to the field in 1934 to lay the first boundary stones.[6] Thus, the delimitation and demarcation of the Syrian–Iraqi border occurred almost a decade and a half after the San Remo Conference of April 1920, which raises two important questions. Firstly, what was the Syrian–Iraqi border before the different parties agreed on a border line in 1932? Secondly, what did it mean to those who wanted to cross it?

At a time when the Syrian–Iraqi border was not clearly delimited, it was nonetheless a practical reality for travellers and goods moving along the Baghdad–Damascus route. The process of travelling between Syria and Iraq, from applying for a passport and visa to passing through the numerous border and customs checkpoints was fraught with difficulties from the early 1920s. The border was also a tangible reality for those who were not allowed to travel, who were denied visas or turned away at border posts, or who took the risk of crossing the desert clandestinely. An inquiry into the formation of the Syrian–Iraqi border therefore requires us to move beyond the classical vision of a border as a line drawn on a map that separates two territorial states. Thus, rather than viewing the formation of a border between Syria and Iraq as the drawing of 'a line in the sand'[7], this chapter argues that the Syrian–Iraqi border took shape as both an institution and infrastructure through the interplay with the intensification of transdesert mobility. Put differently, it argues that whereas the formation of the Syrian–Iraqi

[5] BL, IOR/L/PS/12/2848 - Coll 17/4, Report of the Commission entrusted by the Council with the Study of the Frontier between Syria and Iraq, March 1932; LON, R2348/6A/36215/32587, Report of the Iraq-Syria Border Study Commission on its Activity from 3 to 7 April 1932.

[6] Cosima Flateau, 'La frontière syro-irakienne. La lente définition de la frontière syro-irakienne (1920-1933) (2/2)', *Les clés du Moyen-Orient*, 9 May 2013 https://www.lesclesdumoyenorient.com/La-frontiere-syro-irakienne-La-lente-definition-de-la-frontiere-syro-irakienne.html (accessed 20 May 2022); Nelida Fuccaro, *The Other Kurds: Yazidis in Colonial Iraq* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999), pp. 110–131. See also BL, IOR/L/PS/12/2848 - Coll 17/4, Report of the Commission entrusted by the Council with the Study of the Frontier between Syria and Iraq, 10 September 1932.

[7] James Barr, *A Line in the Sand: Britain, France and the Struggle for the Mastery of the Middle East* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2012).

border affected transdesert movements, mobility too shaped borders and states.[8] As will become clearer in this chapter, the delineation of the Syrian–Iraqi border was one of many bordering processes, such as the development of regulations and legislation governing who, how and where one could travel between Iraq and Syria, the formation of a border infrastructure and the establishment of controls on the ground.

This chapter draws on valuable perspectives developed in the fields of border studies and mobility studies over the last two decades as well as on recent historical scholarship that has re-examined the formation of state borders in the post-Ottoman Middle East. As discussed in the Introduction to this dissertation, mobility studies have drawn attention to the fact that the aspiration for and intensification of mobility have been accompanied since the nineteenth century by increased control over mobility and the assertion of a principle of 'spatial ordering'.[9] The regulation, categorisation and channelling of the movements of people and goods enabled states and other powerful actors to balance their desire to promote mobility while restricting certain flows of people and goods.[10] Furthermore, since the late 1990s, there has been a major paradigm shift within border studies, with scholars abandoning a dominant view of borders as rigid territorial borderlines in favour of one in which borders are conceived as social constructions. This perspective has opened the way for studies on the fluctuating nature of borders and the multiple actors involved in their formation and reshaping over time; in short, the border is now approached as a dynamic and co-constructed phenomenon.[11]

These two fields of study have considerably enriched the historiography of the Middle East by encouraging historians to rethink the formation of territorial states in the post-Ottoman period beyond the traditional focus on treaties and diplomatic negotiations. Recent historical studies have shown the influence of the dynamics and actors of the borderlands, as well as of

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[8] Darshan Vigneswaran and Joel Quirk, *Mobility Makes States: Migration and Power in Africa* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015). Similarly, historians and other scholars have highlighted the dynamic and mutually constitutive relationships between state formation/border making and migration; see, for example, Margit Fauser, Anne Friedrichs and Levke Harders, 'Migrations and Borders: Practices and Politics of Inclusion and Exclusion in Europe from the Nineteenth to the Twenty-first Century', *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 34:4 (2019), pp. 483–488; Benjamin T. White, 'Refugees and the Definition of Syria, 1920–1939', *Past & Present* 325:1 (May 2017), p. 145.

[9] Tim Cresswell, *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World* (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 15–21.

[10] Véronique Bontemps, Philippe Bourmaud and Cyril Roussel, 'Frontières et circulations au Moyen-Orient (Machrek/Turquie)', *L'Espace Politique* 27:3 (2015), 4–5. http://journals.openedition.org/espacepolitique/3563 (accessed 20 May 2022); Valeska Huber, *Channelling Mobilities: Migration and Globalisation in the Suez Canal Region and Beyond, 1869-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2013); Ronen Shamir, 'Without Borders? Notes on Globalization as a Mobility Regime', *Sociological Theory* 23:2 (2005), pp. 197–217.

[11] David Newman, 'On Borders and Power: A Theoretical Framework', *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 18:1 (2003), pp. 13–25; Chris Rumford, 'Theorizing Borders', *European Journal of Social Theory* 9:2 (2006), pp. 155–169. See also Riccardo Bocco and Daniel Meier, 'Penser la notion de frontière au Moyen-Orient', *A contrario* 3:2 (2005), pp. 3–10; Daniel Meier, 'Penser les frontières au Moyen-Orient et au Sahel : enjeux et concepts', *Égypte/Monde arabe* No.18 (2018), pp. 163–174.

cross-border movements, on the formation of states and borders.[12] Furthermore, this scholarship has shown that the borders of post-Ottoman states did not immediately or entirely impede mobility. The formation of borders—and thereby of legally or economically differentiated spaces—also prompted new forms of mobility between the post-Ottoman states.[13] That said, the new customs barriers evidently disrupted pre-existing patterns of trade to a certain extent. Similarly, the introduction of identification and travel documents along with the implementation of border controls had a real impact on travel possibilities between the post-Ottoman states.[14] Furthermore, a growing number of historians have shown that the territorial reconfiguration of the post-Ottoman Middle East was characterised by the emergence of new legislation, norms and monitoring practices at the national, international and global levels that defined who was entitled to move across the post-Ottoman states and under what conditions.[15]

Building on these studies, this chapter examines the tensions and intersections between the formation of territorially bounded states and transdesert mobility by pursuing three lines of

[12] Toufoul Abou-Hodeib, 'Sanctity across the Border: Pilgrimage Routes and State Control in Mandate Lebanon and Palestine', in Cyrus Schayegh and Andrew Arsan (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of the History of the Middle East Mandates* (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 383–394; Seda Altuğ and Benjamin Thomas White, 'Frontières et pouvoir d'État: La frontière turco-syrienne dans les années 1920 et 1930', *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire* 193:3 (2009), pp. 91–104; Matthieu Cimino (ed.), *Syria: Borders, Boundaries, and the State* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); Matthew H. Ellis, *Desert Borderland: The Making of Modern Egypt and Libya* (Stanford, California: Standford University Press, 2008); Robert S. G. Fletcher, *British Imperialism and the Tribal Question* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Cyrus Schayegh, 'The Many Worlds of Abud Yasin; or, What Narcotics Trafficking in the Interwar Middle East Can Tell Us about Territorialization', *The American Historical Review* 116:2 (2011), pp. 273–30; Carl Shook, 'The Origins and Development of Iraq's National Boundaries, 1918–1932: Policing and Political Geography in the Iraq-Nejd and Iraq-Syria Borderlands' (PhD thesis, University of Chicago, 2018); Jordi Tejel, 'Making Borders from below: The Emergence of the Turkish-Iraqi Frontier, 1918–1925', *Middle Eastern Studies* 54:5 (2018), pp. 811–826; Jordi Tejel, '"Des femmes contre des moutons": Franchissements féminins de la frontière turco-syrienne (1929–1944)', *20&21. Revue d'histoire* No. 145 (2020), pp. 35–47.

[13] Jean-David Mizrahi, *Genèse de l'Etat mandataire: Service des Renseignements et bandes armées en Syrie et au Liban dans les années 1920* (Paris : Publications de la Sorbonne, 2003); Jordi Tejel, '"Des femmes contre des moutons": Franchissements féminins de la frontière turco-syrienne (1929-1944)', *20&21. Revue d'histoire* No. 145 (2020), pp. 35–47. On new taxation as a motivation for Bedouin tribes to cross borders, see Laura Stocker, 'The "Camel Dispute": Cross-Border Mobility and Tribal Conflicts in the Iraqi-Syrian Borderland, 1929–34', in *Regimes of Mobility: Borders and State Formation in the Middle East, 1918-1946* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), pp. 319–350.

[14] On customs policies and tariffs, see Ramazan Hakkı Öztan, 'The Last Ottoman Merchants: Regional Trade and Politics of Tariffs in Aleppo's Hinterland, 1921–1929', in *Regimes of Mobility*, pp. 80–108; Ramazan Hakkı Öztan, 'The Great Depression and the Making of Turkish-Syrian Border, 1921–1939', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 52:2 (May 2020), pp. 311–326; Şevket Pamuk and Roger Owen, *A History of Middle East Economies in the Twentieth Century* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998); Frank Peter, 'Dismemberment of Empire and Reconstitution of Regional Space; the Emergence of 'National' Industries in Damascus between 1918 and 1946', in Nadine Méouchy and Peter Sluglett (eds.), *The British and the French Mandates in Comparative Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), pp. 415–446. On travel and identification documents, see Lauren Banko, *The Invention of Palestinian Citizenship, 1918-1947* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

[15] Lauren Banko, 'Refugees, Displaced Migrants, and Territorialization in Interwar Palestine', *Mashriq & Mahjar* 5:2 (2018), pp. 19–48; Liat Kozma, *Global Women, Colonial Ports: Prostitution in the Interwar Middle East* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017); Jordi Tejel and Ramazan Hakkı Öztan (eds.), *Regimes of Mobility*.

inquiry. First, it explores the practical ways in which the Syrian and Iraqi administrations attempted to monitor cross-border mobility. In other words, it looks at the instruments and techniques deployed by the Mandate authorities and local governments in their attempts to promote, restrict and control the movements of people across the Syrian–Iraqi border. In doing so, it pays particular attention to the evolution of these practices during the interwar years, highlighting experiments, shortcomings and modifications that are evident throughout this period. Border management was constantly revised in response to the particularities of cross-border mobility but also in response to specific contexts, such as cholera epidemics. Specifically, the chapter begins with an examination of the introduction of passport and visa requirements through which the Mandate states of Iraq and Syria aimed to 'identify and track the movements' of nationals and foreigners across their territory.[16] It then turns to an examination of the introduction of on-the-ground practices of control and inter-state cooperation. In particular, it highlights the establishment and exchange of records to keep track of unwanted travellers and migrants, before discussing the involvement of transport companies in the control of travellers.

The second avenue of inquiry concerns border infrastructure as well as the spatiality of border management and cross-border mobility. Where were the devices of control located and how did the border materialise in space? The chapter examines how cross-border movements shaped and adapted to the formation of a border infrastructure, which gradually emerged through the erection of checkpoints and customs posts located some distance from the provisional border line.[17] As this chapter will show, the infrastructure of the border mainly comprised a few border posts erected along main roads and transdesert tracks. An examination of the construction and spatial distribution of border posts transforms 'borders from abstract lines into very real networks of infrastructures'.[18] It reveals that the border was 'a reality on the ground', but it also highlights the varying materialities of borders across space and therewith the spatial disparities entailed in border management. The chapter also explores how mobility flows and border management operate in the gaps of the border infrastructure. The overall picture emerging from a study of the spatiality of border management is that of well-monitored corridors maintained across a highly permeable border.

[16] John Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport: Surveillance, Citizenship and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 1.
[17] For an approach to border infrastructure that inspired this chapter, see: Lauren Banko, 'Border Transgressions, Border Controls: Mobility along Palestine's Northern Frontier, 1930–46', in Jordi Tejel and Ramazan Hakkı Öztan (eds.), *Regimes of Mobility*, pp. 256–285.
[18] Matthieu Rey, 'Drawing a Line in the Sand? Another (Hi)Story of Borders', in Matthieu Cimino (ed.), *Syria: Borders, Boundaries, and the State* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), p. 32.

Through its examination of the rules and practices of control and the border infrastructure, the chapter demonstrates that the specificities of the context and period, namely the indeterminate delineation of the Syrian–Iraqi border and the desert nature of the borderlands—as well as the incapacity of the Mandate states to control the entire border zone prompted them to develop techniques aimed at exercising a semblance of 'remote control'. This term has been deployed by scholars to account for changes in the management and nature of borders in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, reflecting the emergence of fragmented and multifaced 'mobile borders', which were no longer necessarily tied to a territory. Moreover, the term captures the development of techniques for controlling and screening travellers and migrants upstream and downstream of the border lines themselves.[19] However, historians and social scientists at large have shown that some elements of the 'remote control' of mobility can be traced back to the early twentieth century; for example, the granting of visas and passports in embassies, the screening of travellers at railways stations and ports, or the involvement of shipping companies in regulating their passengers.[20] Aristide Zolberg was one of the first scholars to develop this notion to describe changes in the 'international migration regime' in the early twentieth century:

> With refoulement (forced return) at the border increasingly inconvenient and risky, states resorted to "remote control"—that is, the requirement of obtaining permission to enter before embarking on the journey, by way of a visa entered in the passport by an official of the state of destination […]. Elaborated in relation to the technology of rail travel, it was most effective when border-crossing took place at sea, since ships constitute containers whose loading and unloading can be supervised, with transportation companies made to function as ancillary border police.[21]

Certainly, what distinguishes the migration and border regimes of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is the 'generalization' of these techniques of 'remote control', which, however, remained 'fragmented, irregular, and disconnected' during the interwar

[19] Virginie Guiraudon and Gallya Lahav, 'Comparative Perspectives on Border Control: Away from the Border and Outside the State', in Peter Andreas and Timothy Snyder (eds), *The Wall Around the West: State Borders and Immigration Controls in North America and Europe* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), pp. 55–77; Chris Rumford, 'Theorizing Borders', *European Journal of Social Theory* 9:2 (2006), p. 158; William Walters, 'Border/Control', *European Journal of Social Theory* 9:2 (2006), pp. 193–194.

[20] Gabriel Popescu, *Bordering and Ordering the Twenty-First Century*, *Understanding Borders* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012), p. 83; John Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport*, p. 266; William Walters, 'Border/Control', p. 19.

[21] Aristide R. Zolberg, 'Managing a World on the Move', *Population and Development Review* Vol. 32 (2006), pp. 223–224.

years.[22] As will be shown, the measures and practices elaborated by the Mandate states of Syria and Iraq to regulate travellers before they reached their territory were mainly attempts to remedy their inability to exert significant power in the borderlands.

The third strand of inquiry focuses on the politics and practices of exclusion that characterised the processes of state territorialisation and bordering by examining how the Syrian–Iraqi border served to regulate, control and, above all, filter transdesert mobilities. As David Newman has pointed out, borders constitute particular institutional forms, namely durable but constantly changing social constructs that create difference and separation between people and spaces.

> Like all institutions [borders] have their own set of internal rules which govern their behavior, much of which becomes self-perpetuating and resistant to change. Border institutions govern the extent of inclusion and exclusion, the degree of permeability, the laws governing trans-boundary movement […].[23]

The process of bordering that marked the interwar period entailed the development and institutionalisation of rules and norms that contributed to the drawing of boundaries between nationals and foreigners, citizens and aliens—a process that was 'formative in (un)making communities'.[24] A substantive body of historical literature on the Middle East has demonstrated the role played by the discourses and practices of inclusion and exclusion in shaping post-Ottoman citizenships, migration regimes and experiences of refugeedom.[25] Many historical studies on identity formation and nationalism have also uncovered the concurrent dynamics generating 'sameness' and 'otherness' during the formation of territorial states in the aftermath

[22] Gabriel Popescu, *Bordering and Ordering the Twenty-First Century*, p. 83; Aristide R. Zolberg, 'Managing a World on the Move', p. 238.
[23] Quote: David Newman, 'On Borders and Power', p. 14. See also David Newman, 'The Lines that Continue to Separate Us: Borders in a Borderless World', *Progress in Human Geography* 30:2 (2006), pp. 6–7.
[24] Seda Altuğ, 'The Turkish-Syrian Border and Politics of Difference in Turkey and Syria (1921–1939)' in Matthieu Cimino (ed), *Syria: Borders, Boundaries, and the State*, p. 68.
[25] Victoria Abrahamyan, 'Citizen Strangers: Identity Labelling and Discourse in the French Mandatory Syria, 1920–1932', *Journal of Migration History* 6:1 (2020), pp. 40–61; Laura Robson, *States of Separation: Transfer, Partition, and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017); Jordi Tejel and Ramazan Hakkı Öztan, 'The Special Issue 'Forced Migration and Refugeedom in the Modern Middle East' Towards Connected Histories of Refugeedom in the Middle East', *Journal of Migration History* 6:1 (2020), pp. 1–15; Benjamin T. White, 'Refugees and the Definition of Syria, 1920–1939', *Past & Present* 325:1 (May 2017), pp. 141–178.

of the First World War.[26] It is also noteworthy that similar dynamics shaping 'differences and similarities' were at work within state borders.[27]

Drawing on these studies, the third aim of this chapter is to examine how changes in territorial borders and cultural boundaries affected who was eligible to enter or leave Syrian and Iraqi territory and who was not. Thus, reflection on the formation of the Syrian–Iraqi border institution necessitates an examination of the social and symbolic norms that underpinned the bordering process and were derived from it.[28] In its exploration of the interactions between borders and mobility, this chapter attends to social, racial and gender considerations that informed the politics of inclusion and exclusion, conditioning and affecting mobility between Syria and Iraq.[29] As will become apparent, 'criminals', 'suspects', and 'undesirables' were categories that gained ground within the Mandate administrations and were used to describe a broad but vague set of unwanted people. Admittedly, as a historian, I have found it challenging to disengage from state-based categories, especially when most of the sources available for writing this chapter come from the archives of the French and British Mandate administrations. With few exceptions, the chapter does not highlight the meanings that the actors themselves ascribed to their movements, when these were presented as 'illicit' by authorities of the post-Ottoman states.[30] Nonetheless, uncovering the discourses and regulations that contributed to the delegitimisation and criminalisation of certain forms of mobility by portraying them as harmful and labelling them as 'undesirable', can help to challenge state categories and classifications.[31]

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[26] These works include Leyla Dakhli, 'Arabisme, nationalisme arabe et identifications transnationales arabes au 20e siècle', *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire* 103:3 (2009), pp. 12–25; Adeed Dawisha, *Iraq: A Political History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Aline Schlaepfer, *Les intellectuels juifs de Bagdad: Discours et allégeances (1908-1951)* (Leiden: Brill, 2016); Peter Wien, *Iraqi Arab Nationalism: Authoritarian, Totalitarian and Pro-Fascist Inclinations, 1932–1941* (London: Routledge, 2006).

[27] Aline Schlaepfer, 'Sidon against Beirut: Space, Control, and the Limits of Sectarianism within the Jewish Community of Modern Lebanon', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 53:3 (August 2021), p. 425.

[28] On the connections between studies on borders/bordering and boundary/boundary work, see Carolin Fischer, Christin Achermann and Janine Dahinden, 'Revisiting Borders and Boundaries: Exploring Migrant Inclusion and Exclusion from Intersectional Perspectives', *Migration Letters* 17:4 (2020), pp. 477–485.

[29] Valeska Huber, *Channelling Mobilities*, p. 6.

[30] For a work that foregrounds the meanings ascribed by the actors of so-called 'illicit' mobilities to their movements, see Haggai Ram, *Intoxicating Zion: A Social History of Hashish in Mandatory Palestine and Israel* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020), p. 34.

[31] As Itty Abraham and Willem Van Schendel point out, '[many] transnational movements of people, commodities, and ideas are illegal because they defy the norms and rules of formal political authority, but they are quite acceptable, "licit," in the eyes of participants in these transactions and flows.' See Itty Abraham and Willem Van Schendel, 'Introduction: The Making of Illicitness', in Willem Van Schendel and Itty Abraham (eds.), *Illicit Flows and Criminal Things: States, Borders, and the Other Side of Globalization* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), pp. 1–37, here: p. 4.

Passports, visas and *laissez-passer*

Although the Syrian–Iraqi border did not exist as a physical border line for an extended duration, commencing from the early 1920s, it began to take shape as a body of regulations and controlling practices with the introduction of identification and travel documents. Early on, the French and British Mandate states sought to distinguish their nationals from foreigners by issuing passports, which served to make 'the relevant differences knowable and thus enforceable', to borrow the words of John Torpey.[32] At a time when the Mandate authorities endeavoured to establish territorially-bound forms of nationality and citizenship, these documents were central instruments in 'making citizens', as Lauren Banko has shown in the case of Mandate Palestine.[33] They also came to govern the mobility of individuals entering and leaving the territories of the post-Ottoman states. In the aftermath of World War I, all kinds of travellers were gradually required to produce passports, visas and other travel documents to be allowed to move across the former Ottoman Empire. The documentary regime that emerged in the 1920s differed greatly from that of the late Ottoman period and profoundly altered the possibilities of travel around and across the Syrian Desert by making travel contingent on obtaining prior permission from consular officials.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, the Ottoman state became increasingly concerned with identifying and tracking people's movements within its empire; to this end, it attempted to introduce various identification documents.[34] The central government's increasing distrust of mobility was apparent in its renewed efforts to regulate the movements of nomadic tribes, restrict overseas migration of Ottoman subjects, as well as limit the movements of vagrants and individuals belonging to the lower socio-economic classes in general.[35] To control foreigners and Ottoman subjects more effectively and to extract resources from the latter

[32] John Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport*, p. 2.
[33] Lauren Banko, *The Invention of Palestinian Citizenship, 1918–1947*.
[34] The Ottoman state's growing distrust of mobility began even earlier. As Reşat Kasaba has shown, although mobility remained a fundamental feature of the Ottoman Empire until its demise, from the late seventeenth century onwards the central government in Istanbul increasingly sought to identify and monitor itinerant populations—notably rural migrants—as well as settle nomadic tribes and refugee. See Reşat Kasaba, *A Moveable Empire: Ottoman Nomads, Migrants, and Refugees* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009), pp. 53–83.
[35] David Gutman, 'Travel Documents, Mobility Control, and the Ottoman State in an Age of Global Migration, 1880–1915', *Journal of the Ottoman and Turkish Studies Association* 3:2 (November 2016), pp. 347–368; Reşat Kasaba, *A Moveable Empire*, pp. 84–122; Fulya Özkan, 'Unification of the Market, Fragmentation of the People: Famine and Migration on the Trabzon-Bayezid Road in the Late Ottoman Empire', in Selim Karahasanoğlu and Deniz Cenk Demir (eds.), *History from Below: A Tribute in Memory of Donald Quataert* (Istanbul: Istanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2016), pp. 217–242; Marie-Carmen Smyrnelis, 'Identifier les Ottomans et les étrangers et contrôler leurs mobilités', in Elisabetta Borromeo and Nicolas Vatin (eds.), *Les Ottomans par eux-mêmes* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres , 2020), p. 158.

(through taxes and recruitment), the Istanbul government developed techniques that enabled the identification of residents throughout the Ottoman Empire.

In the 1810s, the Ottoman state introduced a kind of internal passport, the *mürur tezkeresi*, to regulate the migration of rural populations to Istanbul. In 1841, it made it mandatory for every Ottoman subject within the empire, wishing to travel outside of their district (*kaza*), to obtain this document. Later, in the 1880s, a standard passport model was introduced to replace the various documents that had been in use until then, thus formalizing the role of the passport. Simultaneously, beginning in the 1840s, the government in Istanbul required individuals wishing to travel outside the Ottoman empire to apply for a special permit. Over time, the Ottoman state also sought to assert its hold on foreign travellers and Ottoman emigrants. By the end of the century, foreigners were required to obtain a visa recorded on their passports from Ottoman representatives abroad in order to travel across Ottoman territories. Following their abrogation by the Young Turks in 1908, the regulations on 'external' passports underwent a series of revisions in the 1910s. Eventually, with the passing of the Passport Law of 1918, it became mandatory for anyone entering or leaving Ottoman territory to present a passport.[36]

Although documentary requirements for travel within and outside of the Ottoman Empire increased during the nineteenth century, their implementation remained limited. In the Eastern Mediterranean, in general, passports were used only sparingly in the nineteenth century, as Will Hanley has shown in the case of Egypt. Whereas the Egyptian government required all Egyptians to have passports in the late nineteenth century, the lack of effective border control made it easy for individuals to travel without papers by avoiding main border checks, such as the one at Port Said. Hanley argues that passports mainly facilitated travel for their holders, as they were used primarily to indicate 'the respectability of the bearer' rather than to identify them.[37] In summary, nineteenth-century documentary regimes governing mobility within and across the Ottoman Empire remained lax, and the implementation of controls on travellers was very irregular.

[36] David Gutman, 'Travel Documents, Mobility Control', pp. 347–368; Christoph Herzog, 'Migration and the State: On Ottoman Regulations Concerning Migration Since the Age of Mahmud II', in Ulrike Freitag et al. (eds.), *The City in the Ottoman Empire: Migration and the Making of Urban Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 117–134; Marie-Carmen Smyrnelis, 'Identifier les Ottomans et les étrangers et contrôler leurs mobilités', pp. 155–162.

[37] Will Hanley, 'Papers for Going, Papers for Staying: Identification and Subject Formation in the Eastern Mediterranean', in Liat Kozma, Cyrus Schayegh and Avner Wishnitzer (eds.), *A Global Middle East: Mobility, Materiality and Culture in the Modern Age, 1880–1940* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), pp. 177–200.

During the 1920s, the Mandate states issued nationality legislation that adapted the Ottoman nationality law of 1869 to the context of the territorially bounded nation-states of the post-war period. Implementation of the process took some time, as it was only with the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 that Turkey relinquished all responsibility for the nationals of the various post-Ottoman states. Until 1924–1925, when the various states under French and British Mandates passed their nationality laws, post-Ottoman Arabs were officially free to choose their nationality.[38] As Lauren Banko has shown, the 1920s were a period of great uncertainty in Mandate Palestine. Despite British attempts to shape a 'state-centered, national identity', the flexibility of previous Ottoman/Arab conceptions of identity persisted into the Mandate period. Initially, passports and visas were not required to cross the borders of Palestine, but from the mid-1920s, the British introduced a tighter documentary regime, which entailed more stringent passport and visa requirements and tighter border controls.[39] Similar developments took place in Iraq and Syria with regard to nationality laws and the introduction of identification and travel documents.

In the French mandated territories, High Commissioner Gouraud decreed that from 1 October 1920, anyone born in Syria or Lebanon could only leave or enter these territories with a passport, which was valid for a maximum period of one year. Article 7 specified that the requirements for French nationals and foreigners entering or leaving French mandated territories remained the same, suggesting that similar regulations already existed for foreigners.[40] Another decree (No. 2576), published on 24 April 1924, provided further clarification relating to foreigners, who were now required to present a passport and a French visa to enter or leave Syria and Lebanon. At the same time, the text specified special treatment for foreigners residing within 100 kilometres of the Syrian border and more than 100 kilometres from a French consulate. These individuals were allowed to present themselves at a Syrian border post with a passport not bearing a French consular visa and could obtain it directly from the border authorities, notably in Palmyra, Deir ez-Zor, Abu-Kemal and Al-Hasakah.[41] A new decree was issued on 24 December 1928, which adapted the existing passport regime according

[38] Lauren Banko, 'Claiming Identities in Palestine: Migration and Nationality under the Mandate', *Journal of Palestine Studies* 46:2 (2017), p. 30; Philippe Bourmaud, 'Construction nationale et discrimination au Proche-Orient', *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire* 103:3 (2009), p. 68.
[39] Lauren Banko, 'Claiming Identities in Palestine', pp. 26–43; Lauren Banko, 'Keeping Out the 'Undesirable Elements': The Treatment of Communists, Transients, Criminals, and the Ill in Mandate Palestine', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 47:6 (2019), pp. 1153–1180.
[40] Decree 376, *Bulletin Mensuel des Actes Administratif du Haut-Commissariat*, no date. https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6462687f/f31.image.r=passeport (accessed 23 May 2022).
[41] Decree 2576, *Bulletin Mensuel des Actes Administratif du Haut-Commissariat*, 24 April 1924. https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k65191121/f2.item.r=passeport (accessed 23 May 2022).

to the recommendations made at the League of Nations Passport Conference of May 1926.[42] For nationals of the French Mandate states, the decree removed the obligation to obtain a visa from the French authorities in order to leave or return to these territories.[43] However, foreign workers wishing to obtain a visa were now required to present a work certificate from their employer which had previously been endorsed by the *Sûreté Générale*.[44] The decree stipulated that individuals who had entered the French mandated territories illegally would be prosecuted if they did not have a passport, or they would be deported to the border if their passport did not bear a visa.[45] The new decree no longer specified that certain border posts could issue visas to inhabitants of the borderlands (i.e. living within 100 kilometres of the border and 100 kilometres of a consulate). However, another decree published the following year on 27 April 1929 introduced a derogation for nationals of Iraq and Transjordan residing more than 100 km from a French consulate, which authorised them to obtain a French visa directly at the border posts of Abu-Kemal, Al-Hasakah, Deir ez-Zor and Deraa.[46]

On the other side of the Syrian Desert, the British introduced similar passport regulations early on. In October 1918, a notification published in the *Baghdad Times* stipulated that all subjects of 'allied or neutral powers' (except British subjects) were required to possess a passport or a 'certificate of nationality' from their consular authorities in order to reside in the Mesopotamian areas under British rule.[47] The 'Mesopotamia Passport Regulations', issued in late 1919, required that all foreigners, besides possessing the mandatory passports, obtain formal authorization from the British 'Civil Commissioner' before entering or leaving Mesopotamia. The regulations stipulated that 'inhabitants of Mesopotamia' would not receive passports for the time being; instead, they would be provided with simple certificates of identity valid for one year.[48] The British subsequently issued a Passport Law in July 1923, but according to the British government's report submitted to the League of Nations, the regulation was initially implemented only partially. Similar to the law enacted in Syria, the British law

[42] CADC, 50COM544, Decree 2283, 24 December 1928.
[43] Previously, Syrians and Lebanese who wished to travel abroad had to pay three taxes: the first to obtain a passport, the second to obtain the French consular visa and the third to obtain the foreign consular visa. CADC, 50CPCOM310, the French High Commissioner to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Beirut, 5 January 1928.
[44] CADC, 50CPCOM310, the French High Commissioner to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Beirut, 3 January 1929.
[45] CADC, 50COM544, Decree 2283, 24 December 1928.
[46] Decree 2530, *Bulletin Mensuel des Actes Administratif du Haut-Commissariat*, 27 April 1929. https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k64868460/f3.item.r=passeport (accessed 23 May 2022). Another exception was introduced with Decree 3107 of 5 May 1930, which added Kamechlié and Souar to the list of border posts issuing visas for the inhabitants of the borderlands; see CADN, 1SL/1/V/442, Decree 3107, 5 May 1930.
[47] CADC, 48CPCOM48, Notification No. 55, *Bagdad Times*, 12 October 1918.
[48] CADC, 48CPCOM48, Mesopotamia Passport Regulations 1919, Wilson (Civil Commissioner in Mesopotamia), Baghdad, 24 October 1919.

stipulated that foreigners wishing to enter Iraq had to be in possession of a passport endorsed by the competent authorities representing the Iraqi government. Prior to the passing of a nationality law, Iraqi nationals could apply for a travel permit (*laissez-passer*) instead of a passport.[49] In October 1926, however, the situation changed when the Iraqi nationality law came into force.[50]

Implications of the documentary regime

The introduction of identity and travel documents had a huge impact on the conditions under which people could travel across the Syrian Desert. In the 1920s, when the Syrian–Iraqi border was neither delineated nor demarcated, foreign travellers and local residents experienced the shifting territoriality through passport and visa formalities. Whereas the documentary regime that remained in place during the first half of the 1920s continued to allow residents of the borderlands to obtain visas directly at the border posts, travellers taking the transdesert routes were obliged to apply at embassies before embarking on their journeys. This regulation enabled the Mandate states to exercise some control over those wishing to enter their territory before they even reached the border. In June 1925, for example, the British consul in Beirut received information about two 'Bolshevik agents and agitators' who were banned from Iraq, and to whom he should not issue visas. He also notified the Director of the *Sûreté Générale* in the French mandated territories, requesting information on whether these two individuals were in Syria.[51] The role of consular officials was not limited to granting or refusing to grant visas. French consuls in Iraq often transmitted information about travellers leaving Baghdad for Syria to the French High Commission. On 7 September 1926, Mr Maigret, the French consul in Baghdad, sent a telegram to the High Commissioner in Beirut, asking him to turn back to Iraq a woman known as Jamila Acjarida, along with her sister and daughter, who were due to arrive in Damascus the next day; he provided details of the car and driver.[52] As he offered no explanation, it can only be assumed that he had been informed (perhaps by the transport company) that these individuals were travelling without visas.

The need for travellers to complete certain administrative formalities before travelling between Syria and Iraq can be viewed as one of the first 'frontier effects' of the formation of

[49] LON, R58/1/17502/44571, Report on the Administration of Iraq for the Period April 1923–December 1924, pp. 64–66; LON, R59/1/17502/51544, 'The Iraq Passport Law, 1923', attached to the Report on the Administration of Iraq for the year 1925.
[50] Philippe Bourmaud, 'Construction nationale et discrimination au Proche-Orient', p. 68.
[51] CADN, 1SL/1/V/849, British Consul Satow to *Sûreté Générale*, Beirut, 14 June 1926.
[52] CADN, 1SL/1/V/849, French Consul Maigret to the French High Commissioner, Baghdad, 7 September 1926.

territorial states. The aforementioned Palestinian journalist, Munif al-Husayni, recounted in *Al-Jami'a al-'Arabiyya* the difficulties he encountered in obtaining a visa to travel through Syria from Jerusalem to Baghdad in April 1932. 'The invitation [from the Iraqi government] came late', he wrote on 29 March 1932, 'and a trip to Baghdad like this requires preparations and unavoidable procedures such as visa formalities, which are often an insurmountable obstacle set up by the Mandate authorities in countries such as Syria and Palestine […].' In the first instance, the agent at the French consulate in Jerusalem refused to grant him a visa for Syria and asked him to wait for eight days. However, Munif al-Husayni was not deterred, and after much ado, he finally obtained a transit visa for Syria (without permission to stop there). He was told by the French consular administrators that legislative elections would be held in Syria on March 30 and that the French did not want him to come into contact with Syrian nationalists during his trip.[53]

Passport and visa requirements were crucial components of the mobility and border regimes that governed the movements of individuals across the post-Ottoman states and the Syrian Desert in the interwar period. However, these regulations were not immediately enforced and were not always strictly applied, requiring frequent adjustments in the 1920s. In August 1925, High Commissioner Sarrail was informed by the *Sûreté Générale* that a Russian engineer, Theodore Anangine, had arrived in Beirut on 16 August from Baghdad, where he had obtained a visa from the French consul three days earlier. However, Decree 2576 of 24 April 1924 had made the prior agreement of the High Commissioner mandatory for any visa issued to a Russian or German national. Maurice Sarrail reminded the French consul in Baghdad to apply the regulations strictly.[54] There was also confusion about who was entitled to issue visas. In June 1927, the French consul in Baghdad wrote to the French High Commissioner making two almost contradictory requests, thereby indicating that the regulations were not completely clear. On the one hand, he asked him to require the border agents to apply the same fees as the French consulate when issuing visas to Iraqis, thus suggesting that border officials continued in practice to grant visas to people other than borderlanders. On the other hand, he added that, in his view, the High Commissioner should require that visas for Iraqis be issued only at the French consulate.[55]

[53] The National Library of Israel, 'Bayna al-Quds wa Baghdād: Min Dimashq ilā al-Ruṭba (1)', *Al-Jami'a al-'Arabiyya*, 6 April 1932, p. 1, https://jrayed.org/en/newspapers/home (accessed 23 May 2022). NB The article is dated 29 March 1932, Damascus.
[54] CADN, 1SL/1/V/846, High Commissioner Sarrail to Maigret (French consul, Bagdad), Beirut, 31 August 1925.
[55] CADN, 1SL/1/V/446, French Consul Maigret to the French High Commissioner, Baghdad, 21 June 1927.

Apart from the uneven implementation of passport and visa regulations, the spatial distribution of the border posts and their organisation also posed difficulties for the Mandate states as they sought to control cross-border mobility.

Border Infrastructure, Border Control

During the Mandate period, the French and British authorities developed a network of administrative buildings, border posts and checkpoints throughout Iraq and Syria to control and regulate both internal and cross-border mobility. In Iraq, the British authorities reinstated some buildings dating from the Ottoman period. Known as *serai*, they used to house the police and tax collectors but they also served as warehouses and even courtrooms. In the early 1920s, the British constructed similar buildings throughout Iraq on the main roads to reinforce their control over outlying areas and to monitor mobility.[56] One in particular served as the main checkpoint for cars travelling between Syria and Iraq. The *serai* of Ramadi was located at the crossroads of the two transdesert routes, the Euphrates route leading from Baghdad to Aleppo and the Baghdad–Damascus route. As Iain Jackson has pointed out, the building 'was built over the road, forcing all travellers to pass through it and to present their passports'. However, Ramadi was not only a passport checkpoint, as is clear from the plan of the building reproduced in Jackson's article. The *serai* also included a customs office, a quarantine station, a hospital and several courtyards.[57] Since the initiation of motorised transport across the desert, the *serai* of Ramadi had served as the main border post on Iraqi territory with the purpose of controlling travellers, inspecting goods and preventing the spread of epidemics. Yet Ramadi was certainly not the only checkpoint. Between Baghdad and Aleppo, travellers were subject to repeated checks at numerous posts established along the route in the early 1920s. Several travellers who used this route in 1922 and 1923 reported that they had to present their passports at Hit, Anah and Al-Qa'im in Iraqi territory, not to mention the repeated checks conducted in Syrian territory before they reached Aleppo.[58]

During the early part of the interwar period, the Rutbah outpost, located further away towards the provisional border, was used to monitor the Syrian–Iraqi border but not to inspect passports, goods and luggage. Although the building included a customs room,[59] luggage

[56] Iain Jackson, 'The Architecture of the British Mandate in Iraq: Nation-Building and State Creation', *The Journal of Architecture* 21:3 (2016), pp. 391–392.
[57] Iain Jackson, 'The Architecture of the British Mandate', p. 394.
[58] TNA, FO 684/1/23/1, Secretariat of the High Commissioner for Iraq to the Department of Overseas Trade, Baghdad, 7 February 1923; TNA FO 371/9013, Report on a Journey from Baghdad to Aleppo written by Ellis Price, 10 July 1923.
[59] Iain Jackson, 'The Architecture of the British Mandate', p. 395.

inspection was not usually carried out there. The inspection of passenger luggage was primarily conducted in Baghdad 'in deference to the wishes of the transport companies', as noted by the High Commissioner for Iraq in 1928. However, this concession required that secondary checks were performed at various customs posts between Baghdad and the border to ensure that there was no 'leakage', particularly in Ramadi and Fallujah. Therefore, in October 1928, the High Commissioner suggested that all customs formalities should be carried out at Rutbah; a change that would necessitate 'the erection of additional buildings' but would greatly facilitate the procedure.[60] Nonetheless, the Ministry of Finance opposed the High Commissioner's proposal, as an economic report dated 13 October 1928 testifies.

> They [The Ministry of Finance] point out that the baggage cars do not as a rule accompany the passenger convoys and also that the unloading and examination of baggage at Rutbah in the dark (the convoys reach Rutbah at night-fall) would prove more irritating to tired and hungry passengers and drivers than the present system.[61]

The Ministry of Finance added that according to the customs authorities, the auxiliary controls carried out between Baghdad and the border were not too burdensome for travellers, who were often not even aware of them.[62] Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, customs controls remained in place in Ramadi and Baghdad.[63]

On the Syrian side, the French authorities established a border post at Deir ez-Zor, which, like Ramadi, was located at the junction of two transdesert routes: the Aleppo–Baghdad route and the Aleppo–Deir ez-Zor–Mosul route.[64] During the third quarter of 1925 (July–September), the post of the *Service des Renseignements* in Deir ez-Zor controlled the movements of 342 foreign travellers and 135 Syrians entering Syria as well as 297 foreigners and 26 Syrians leaving the country, with the vast majority of foreigners being Iraqis.[65]

In southern Syria in the early 1920s, border authorities screened travellers from Iraq at a post known as Jisr-Torra, located at the entrance to Damascus. But this single checkpoint did not prevent some travellers from evading control, as the Director of the *Sûreté Générale* pointed out in May 1924. In a letter addressed to the French High Commissioner, Colonel Bucheton noted that all travellers coming from Iraq were checked in Damascus, whether they came by

[60] TNA, CO 730/129/9, Economic Report, 15 September 1928, § 927 on customs.
[61] TNA, CO 730/129/9, Economic Report, 13 October 1928, § 955 on customs.
[62] Ibid.
[63] *Maps of 'Iraq with Notes for Visitors* (Baghdad: Government of Iraq, 1929), p. 8.
[64] On the operation of the customs office in Deir ez-Zor, see SHD/GR 4 H 100/2, quarterly report of the French *Service des Renseignements*, Deir ez-Zor, 30 September 1923, pp. 14–15.
[65] CADN, 1SL/1/V/846, 2nd quarterly report from the Deir ez-Zor post, sent by Lieutenant Bret (French intelligence officer) to the High Commissioner's delegate in Deir ez-Zor, 5 October 1925.

the direct route or by the Palmyra route. However, those wanting to go unnoticed could pass through Palmyra and then continue towards Homs, thus avoiding checks. He therefore recommended the creation of a border post in Palmyra, which could be placed under the responsibility of the intelligence officer already present there. This would avoid additional expenses.[66] The High Commissioner's response was not long in coming. He immediately issued a decree providing for the control of travellers in Palmyra from 20 May 1924.[67] Already housing a garrison of *Méhariste* troops since 1921, Palmyra now also accommodated a border post. [68]

In the following months, however, undocumented travellers from Iraq continued to enter Syria illegally, as controls in Palmyra were not very effective. In December 1924, the French consul in Baghdad informed the High Commissioner that many people, especially Armenian migrants, were travelling to Syria without passports and visas; they only possessed a certificate of identity given to them by the local authorities in order to 'get rid' of them, as he put it. 'It is mostly the small rental companies that accept this kind [*sic*] of travellers, who therefore evade our Consulate's control'. He urged the French authorities to 'monitor the roads sufficiently far from Damascus' and to turn back (to Iraq) any car carrying irregular passengers.[69] In response, the High Commissioner and the Director of the *Sûreté Générale* ordered the officers in charge in Palmyra and Homs to ensure that all travellers coming from Iraq were closely checked and turned back if necessary.[70] However, the High Commissioner admitted that checking all travellers would be very difficult due to 'the imprecision and extent of the Syrian-Turkish and Iraqi borders'.[71] In June 1925, it was the head of the *Service des Renseignements* in the French mandated territories who, this time, called for the inspection of travellers in Palmyra, suggesting that controls were not yet fully implemented in that city. Major Dentz pointed out that travellers who were allowed to continue on their way to Damascus could easily avoid the controls because of 'the width of the city'.[72] The post at Palmyra, organised in a very simple way and without

[66] CADN, 1SL/1/V/846, Colonel Bucheton (Director, *Sûreté Générale*) to the French High Commissioner, Beirut, 13 May 1924.
[67] CADN, 1SL/1/V/846, the French High Commissioner to Colonel Bucheton, Beirut, 20 May 1924, transmitting information on Decree 2576.
[68] On the *Méhariste* garrison of Palymra, see Christian Velud, 'Une expérience d'administration régionale en Syrie durant le mandat français: conquête, colonisation et mise en valeur de la Ğazīra: 1920-1936' (PhD thesis: Université Lumière Lyon 2, 1991).
[69] CADN, 1SL/1/V/846, French Consul Maigret to the French High Commissioner, Baghdad, 22 December 1924.
[70] CADN, 1SL/1/V/846, Colonel Bucheton to Commandant Dentz (head of the *Service des Renseignements*), Beirut, 6 January 1925 and the French High Commissioner to the delegate of the High Commissioner in Syria, Beirut, 9 January 1925.
[71] CADN, 1SL/1/V/846, the French High Commissioner to French Consul Maigret, Beirut, 9 January 1925.
[72] SHD/GR 4 H 152/5, report by Commandant Dentz (head of the *Service des Renseignements*) on the Franco-British liaison at Bir Mulusa, Beirut, 15 June 1925.

great expense in 1924, was only transformed into a proper office of the *Sûreté Générale* in 1926.[73]

On the direct transdesert route between Damascus and Baghdad, similar considerations prompted the French authorities to establish a border post ahead of Damascus, which was located further into the desert and closer to Iraqi territory. In 1927, the French had already established a police station at Khan Abu Chamat, some 60 kilometres east of Damascus, to facilitate the surveillance of the transdesert route and protect the convoys, as noted in Chapter 3. But soon, Abu Chamat was also considered an ideal location for the Syrian border post on Baghdad route. Indeed, because some cars were evading controls at the entrance to Damascus, in 1929, the *Sûreté Générale* decided to transfer the border post from Jisr-Torra to Abu Chamat.[74]

The customs and border posts at Palmyra and Abu Chamat in Syria as well as those at Ramadi and Rutbah in Iraq, constituted the emerging infrastructure of the Syrian–Iraqi border, which accompanied or even preceded the demarcation of the border itself.[75] These border posts were not aligned with the provisional border, as defined by the Franco–British Convention of 1920; rather, they were located further upstream from it, constituting what Camille Lefebvre calls '*un dispositif d'arrière-frontière*'.[76] This expression refers to a similar arrangement of mobility controls established across the Sahara in the nineteenth century, which was based on targeted control of mobility rather than total control of territory.[77] An imaginary line passing through the various border posts within Syrian territory delimited an 'inner zone' sandwiched between the Syrian–Iraqi border and the first border posts, which was exempt from customs controls.[78] In other words, state control remained weak beyond the most advanced border posts in the desert. Travellers and goods were checked upstream and downstream of the Syrian–Iraqi border. The journey in between was described, somewhat romantically, as a journey through no-man's land by the French traveller Henry Barué.

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[73] CADN, 1SL/1/V/849, Note from *Service des Renseignements*, Beirut, 18 May 1926.
[74] CADN, 1SL/1/V/842, Annual report submitted by the Inspecteur Général des Polices on 'Sûreté Générale et Police des Etats' for the year 1929, Beirut, 12 February 1930.
[75] In the context of Palestine, Lauren Banko has argued that '[the] infrastructure of the borders came into being alongside their demarcation'. Lauren Banko, 'Border Transgressions, Border Controls', p. 257.
[76] Camille Lefebvre, *Frontières de sable, frontières de papier, Histoire de territoires et de frontières, du jihad de Sokoto à la colonisation française du Niger, XIXe-XXe siècles* (Paris: Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2015), p. 96.
[77] Ibid., pp. 96–106.
[78] CADN, 1SL/1/V/849, communication from the Inspector General of Customs to the Secretariat General of the French High Commission, Beirut, 28 August 1936, which reads: 'Dans la zone située en avant des bureaux susvisés, (dite zone intérieure) c'est-à-dire entre la frontière et la ligne des premiers postes et bureaux, les agents ne peuvent en effet saisir aucune marchandise.'

> La traversée du désert se fait entre deux frontières. C'est en quelque sorte une zone neutre dans laquelle on éprouve un sentiment de liberté à la pensée qu'on relève là d'aucun gouvernement.[79]

According to Darshan Vigneswaran and Joel Quirk, 'human mobility shapes the spatial distribution and concentration of power and authority'. This, they argue, is one of the ways in which 'mobility makes states'.[80] The locations of the border posts in the Syro–Iraqi borderlands aptly illustrates their argument, as their distribution was a direct response to the routes and practices of mobility.[81] Not only did the Mandate authorities align the border posts with the transdesert routes but they also adapted the border infrastructure to cope with travellers attempting to bypass the checkpoints. Consequently, state power was distributed unevenly across space. Outside the border posts on the main routes, the control of both states over individuals' movements was very limited. As an officer of the French *Service des Renseignements* remarked in 1925, traffic could be 'rigorously controlled' on the desert tracks, but it was difficult to prevent circumvention of controls 'in a country where the borders unfolded through desert plains'.[82] In this context, the Syrian–Iraqi borderlands remained a highly porous border zone.

Driving on and off the beaten tracks

Before delving into the Mandate archives, we will first pause to examine the memoirs of Muhammad Jawad Mughniyya, which offer a glimpse into the personal experience of a young Ottoman-born man who attempted to cross the Syrian–Iraqi border without the proper travel documents in the 1920s. A well-known Shia exegete and intellectual, Muhammad Mughniyya recounted in *Tajārib* his journey from Jabal Amel in southern Lebanon to Iraq in 1926, following his decision to travel to Najaf where he desired to receive a religious

[79] Henry Barué, *De Saïgon à Paris, par voie de terre* (Saigon: Auto Club Sud Indochinois, 1936), pp. 68–69. Translation: 'Crossing the desert takes place between two borders. It is a kind of neutral zone where one feels a sense of freedom at the thought that there is no government in charge.'
[80] Darshan Vigneswaran and Joel Quirk, *Mobility Makes States*, p. 23.
[81] The same process can be observed on other borders, where border posts were established in response to the development of cross-border traffic. Examples include the establishment of a post at Zakho in 1924 on the Turkish–Iraqi border due to 'the resumption of trade between Iraq and Turkey' and of one at Siba on the Iraqi–Persian border in 1924 due to the 'inauguration of a motor-car route between Basra and Abadan via Siba'. LON, R58/1/17502/44571, British report submitted to the League of Nations on the administration of Iraq, April 1923–December 1924, p. 64.
[82] CADN, 1SL/1/V/702, Note from *Service des Renseignements* to Director of Economic Services, Beirut, 6 March 1925.

instruction.[83] After departing from his village, Mughniyya first went to Beirut to obtain a passport and a visa and booked a seat with one of the transport companies that provided services to Baghdad. However, the French authorities refused to grant him a passport to leave the country until he had paid the property taxes that his late father had failed to clear. Short of money, Mughniyya decided to try his luck without a passport and visa, and told the employee at the transport company that he had completed the necessary formalities to enter Iraq. At the time, the main route to Baghdad via Damascus was closed because of the Great Syrian Revolt, so he left Beirut in a car with a few other passengers. They headed north along the coast and then turned inland shortly before Tripoli and reached Homs, where a border agent stopped the vehicle and checked the passengers' passports. Mughniyya slipped some coins into his hand and was allowed to continue without any trouble. As they left Homs, the driver told Mughniyya that he would probably not be able to pass the other checkpoints to Baghdad in the same way, but offered to help him. Shortly before arriving in Palmyra, the driver stopped the car, let Mughniyya out and explained to him how he could get through the city, bypassing the checkpoints. Mughniyya followed the advice and managed to cross the city without being spotted. He then reached the car and joined the other passengers, who were waiting for him a little further on. They repeated the same operation at the Iraqi border post and Mughniyya entered Iraq without incident.[84]

In Muhammad Mughniyya's memoirs, first published in 1980, the story of this journey supported his claim that the borders of the Mandate states were 'artificial'. 'How much the presence of artificial borders between Arabs hurts', he wrote, 'so much so that an Arab today needs a passport and visas to travel across his great Arab nation' (*fī waṭanihi-l-kabīr*). My interest here does not lie in his assertion about the supposed 'artificiality' of the borders of post-Ottoman states; rather, it lies in his detailed account of a journey that circumvented the increasing border controls. The successful bribing of the border agent in Homs is striking, firstly because it provides an insight into the potential discrepancies between the formal development of a border regime and its implementation on the ground. Various historians have already shown that the control of cross-border mobility was contingent on the (potential) corruption and discretionary power of border officials in the Middle East during the interwar period.[85] These

[83] Mughniyya does not specify the date of his journey in his memoirs, but he notes that the Damascus route was closed at that time. As traffic through Damascus was suspended between October 1925 and late 1926 (see Chapter 2), it is likely that he travelled in 1926.
[84] Muhammad Jawad Mughniyya, *Tajārib Muḥammad Jawād Mughniyya* (Beirut: Dār al-Jawād 1980).
[85] On corruption, see Haggai Ram, *Intoxicating Zion*. On discretionary power, see Jordi Tejel, '"Des femmes contre des moutons", pp. 35–47.

observations should encourage us, as historians, to consider the role of the individuals who constituted the states under the French and British Mandates, rather than viewing the Mandate state an abstract and uniform entity.[86] Mughniyya also benefited from the assistance provided by his Armenian driver, who was well acquainted with the transdesert routes as well as with the control operations carried out along the tracks. This driver helped him to slip through the cracks of a particularly porous border infrastructure.

During the Great Syrian Revolt as well, several Syrian leaders in Hama who participated in the city's uprising against French forces on 4–5 October 1925[87] fled the repression by crossing the Syrian Desert into Iraq where they took refuge for a while. A British intelligence report indicated that on 19 November 1925, Abd al-Fattah ibn 'Abd al-Rahman arrived in Ramadi, by car, from Hama and stayed there with Bedouin tribes for a few days before continuing his tour of Iraq. This trip was reportedly aimed at gaining the support of the Bedouin shaykhs and Baghdad notables for the cause of the Syrian rebels. The report noted that 'Abd al-Rahman was now in custody in Ramadi.[88] A few weeks later, on 22 December 1925, the French authorities at Palmyra arrested another inhabitant of Hama, Nawras Barudi, as he was trying to return to Syria. Lieutenant Deleuze of the *Service des Renseignements* was put in charge of the investigation to determine whether Nawras Barudi was indeed one of the instigators of the Hama rebellion and to find out why he was returning from Iraq. On the first point, the investigation revealed a series of letters in Nawras Barudi's belongings that implicated the Barudi family in the uprising, according to Lieutenant Deleuze. Some of them had fled to Iraq before seeking to return to Syria or leave for Egypt. In addition, the investigation revealed that in December 1925, Nawras Barudi went to the French consulate in Baghdad to apply for a visa to return to Syria, but faced with questions from officials, he finally abandoned the procedure. He then asked Kawatly, Tawil & Co. if they would transport him to Syria, although he did not have a visa. When the company refused, Nawras decided to leave Baghdad in his own car with a driver, join Kawatly, Tawil & Co.'s convoy for the desert crossing, and then try to get around the city of Palmyra before reaching the border post. When questioned by intelligence officials, a traveller and a driver in the convoy stated that Nawras Barudi's car had tried several times to leave the track en route, without success. The investigation concluded that

[86] See in this respect, Darshan Vigneswaran and Joel Quirk, *Mobility Makes States*, p. 29.
[87] On 4 and 5 October 1925, about 100 insurgents managed to take temporary control of Hama; see Michael Provence, *The Great Syrian Revolt and the Rise of Arab Nationalism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), pp. 95–100; Edmond Rabbath, 'L'insurrection syrienne de 1925–1927', *Revue Historique* 267:2 (1982), pp. 417–421.
[88] TNA, AIR 23/293, Report for the fortnight ending 19 November 1925 by the Special Service Officer, Ramadi.

the driver of the car carrying Barudi and his henchman, fearing arrest, ended up joining the track that led them to Palmyra.[89]

The apprehension of the two instigators of the Hama rebellion illustrates both the scope and limitations of the Mandate states' control on cross-border mobility. To some extent, the organisation and nature of transdesert transport facilitated the monitoring of mobility by Mandate officials and desert administrators. Indeed, crossing the Syrian Desert in a single car was dangerous (besides being forbidden), and joining a convoy was much easier (besides being compulsory), as discussed in Chapter 3. In such a vast desert, few got off the tracks; most travellers followed the well-marked routes between Iraq and Syria. As Lieutenant Deleuze's investigation showed, transport companies were also reluctant to carry travellers who had not received a visa. Moreover, as the above example illustrates, some drivers were afraid to cross the border illegally. All of these factors contributed to funnelling travellers onto the main tracks that passed through the border posts. At the same time, the above-mentioned French and British reports underline the high degree of porosity of the Syrian–Iraqi border. As Lieutenant Deleuze pointed out, several inhabitants from Hama managed to reach Iraq in the aftermath of the insurgency by avoiding the usual travel routes across the desert, thereby bypassing the checkpoints.[90]

Border Management in Times of Epidemics

While the management of the Syrian–Iraqi border by the Mandate states took on different forms across space, it also fluctuated over time in response to extraordinary situations. This was the case when cholera epidemics broke out in southern Iraq and threatened to spread to countries bordering the Syrian Desert. This section examines the nexus between epidemic diseases, cross-border mobility and border making, focusing on the cholera epidemics of 1923, 1927 and 1931. In doing so, it offers new insights into the two bordering processes examined so far, namely the development of border infrastructure and techniques of control, by examining how they were affected by crisis situations and how governments adapted their instruments for managing cross-border mobility to cope with other possible crises. In this case, the risk of cholera epidemics spreading to Syria via the transdesert routes prompted changes to the border infrastructure, documentary regime and mobility controls between Iraq and Syria. As Samuel Dolbee has shown in the case of Mandate Syria, 'disease and public health contributed to the

[89] SHD/GR 4 H 152/5, Report by Lieutenant Deleuze (French intelligence officer, Palmyra), 24 December 1925.
[90] Ibid.

formation of borders and territoriality of post-Ottoman states', as epidemics became both the cause and the pretext for territorial changes implemented by state authorities. The French, for example, used cattle plague as an argument for banning nomadic tribes from crossing borders in search of grazing pasture. They also built quarantine stations to strengthen control of cross-border mobility, which led to the consolidation of the Turkish–Syrian border.[91] A similar pattern is apparent on the transdesert routes between Iraq and Syria, with the cholera outbreak causing a temporary tightening of traffic controls while also prompting measures that affected transdesert mobility in the longer term. On the other hand, border management in times of epidemics did not halt mobility between Iraq and Syria; rather, it resulted in the intensification of state efforts to channel transdesert flows along a very limited number of routes and prevent travellers from crossing the border outside of this corridor.

From the 1830s onwards, and even more so in the last decades of the nineteenth century, the Ottoman state took measures to contain the spread of epidemics by controlling human mobility within the empire as well as across its frontiers. This burgeoning system of sanitary control rested on the construction of quarantine stations along land and sea routes, where government medical officers could screen travellers and conduct health inspections.[92] Over the course of the nineteenth century, the European powers also took an interest in establishing sanitary controls in the Ottoman Empire, particularly after a devastating cholera epidemic that swept through the Hijaz and penetrated Europe in 1865. An international sanitary conference was convened in Istanbul the following year, which recognised, despite British reluctance, that the epidemic had originated in India and spread west via Muslim pilgrims heading to Mecca. Hajj pilgrims were therefore considered the main 'risk group'. In the decades that followed, and through discussions during numerous international conferences, a primarily security-oriented system for managing health issues took shape. Consequently, several quarantine stations were built in the nineteenth century, focusing primarily on the Red Sea, which was the main travel route for Indian pilgrims. The lazarets of Kamaran and Tor (built in 1882 and 1898 respectively) served to control the flow of pilgrims north and south of the Red Sea. Other

[91] Samuel Dolbee, 'Borders, Disease and Territoriality in the Post-Ottoman Middle East', in Jordi Tejel and Ramazan Hakkı Öztan (eds.), *Regimes of Mobility*, pp. 205–227.

[92] On the quarantine stations established in the Ottoman Balkans from the 1830s onwards, and their subsequent development into quasi-border posts, see Andrew Robarts, 'Nowhere to Run to, Nowhere to Hide? Society, State, and Epidemic Diseases in the Early Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Balkans' in Nükhet Varlik (ed.), *Plague and Contagion in the Islamic Mediterranean* (Kalamazoo: ARC Humanities Press, 2017), pp. 221–241.

quarantine stations were built at the beginning of the twentieth century along new pilgrimage routes, notably along of the Hijaz Railway.[93]

Maintaining the flow through the transdesert corridor

In the French mandated territories, like matters related to borders and foreign affairs, the management of health issues, and especially epidemics, was under the jurisdiction of the High Commission rather than local governments. An early measure implemented by the French administration was to rebuild the forty-year-old quarantine station in Beirut, which had been badly damaged during the First World War.[94] In Iraq too, the British sought to centralise the organisation of medical and health structures from the very beginning of the occupation. Early on, the Mandate powers were faced with the management of epidemics, which threatened to spread rapidly with the development of transport infrastructure and the intensification of mobility. As Omar Dewachi puts it: 'The compression of distance and travel time was an express ride for vectors and carriers of disease'. In his view, the 1923 cholera epidemic in Iraq was one of the 'unanticipated consequences' of major advances in transportation.[95] In early August 1923, several cases of cholera were reported south of Basra. Despite the adoption of various containment measures, the epidemic reached Basra after a few days and continued to spread further north towards Baghdad from August to October. The British authorities initially prohibited the movement of pilgrims and third-class travellers on trains, and required a medical certificate from other travellers. However, later, they decided to impose vaccinations for all travellers and particularly for pilgrims on their way to the holy cities of Karbala and Najaf. The

[93] Luc Chantre, *Pèlerinages d'empire: Une histoire européenne du pèlerinage à la Mecque* (Paris: Editions de la Sorbonne, 2018); Sylvia Chiffoleau, 'Les quarantaines au Moyen-Orient: vecteurs ambigus de la modernité médicale (XIXe–XXe siècles)' in Anne-Marie Moulin et Yeşim Işıl Ilman (eds.), *Perilous Modernity: History of Medicine in the Ottoman Empire and the Middle East from the 19th Century Onwards Content* (Istanbul: The Isis Press, 2010), pp. 141–156; Sylvia Chiffoleau, 'Entre bienfaisance, contrôle des populations et agenda international: la politique sanitaire du mandat français en Syrie et au Liban', *Bulletin canadien d'histoire de la médecine* (2013), pp. 91–111; Sylvia Chiffoleau, *Le Voyage à La Mecque: Un pèlerinage mondial en terre d'Islam* (Paris: Bélin, 2017); Michael C. Low, 'Empire and the Hajj: Pilgrims, Plagues, and Pan-Islam under British Surveillance, 1865–1908', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 40:2 (May 2008), pp. 269–290; Francis E. Peters, *The Hajj: The Muslim Pilgrimage to Mecca and the Holy Places* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 266–315; Gülen Sariyildiz and Oya Dağlar Macar, 'Cholera, Pilgrimage, and International Politics of Sanitation: The Quarantine Station on the Island of Kamaran' in Nükhet Varlik (eds.), *Plague and Contagion in the Islamic Mediterranean* (Kalamazoo: ARC Humanities Press, 2017), pp. 243–273; Eric Tagliacozzo, 'Hajj in the Time of Cholera: Pilgrim Ships and Contagion from Southeast Asia to the Red Sea', in James L. Gelvin and Nile Green (eds.), *Global Muslim in the Age of Steam and Print* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), pp. 103–120; Valeska Huber, 'International Bodies: The Pilgrimage to Mecca and the Emergence of International Health Regulations', in Eric Tagliacozzo and Shawkat M. Toorawa (eds.), *The Hajj: Pilgrimage in Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 175–195.

[94] Sylvia Chiffoleau, 'Entre bienfaisance, contrôle des populations et agenda international', pp. 10–11.

[95] Omar Dewachi, *Ungovernable Life: Mandatory Medicine and Statecraft in Iraq* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), p. 15, quote: p. 58.

requirement that travellers produce a certificate of vaccination to move around the country was a way of maintaining the flow of people and goods for economic purposes, while limiting the spread of cholera.[96]

For their part, the French authorities took a series of preventive measures for fear that the epidemic would spread to Syria due to the extensive movements of people and goods along the Euphrates route. The authorities set up a 'cordon sanitaire' at Abu Kemal where they imposed a five-day quarantine and cholera vaccination regime for travellers to Syria.[97] The French consul in Iraq also announced a ban on the export to Syria of certain foodstuffs likely to transmit cholera, notably dates. In early October 1923, the British stopped a convoy of 17 cars at the border post of Al-Qa'im and only allowed them to leave after the cars had been cleared of any potentially contaminated goods.[98] The 1923 epidemic led to tighter controls on movements between Syria and Iraq, resulting in some limitations on cross-border mobility. However, French fears were quickly dispelled as the measures taken by the British authorities in Iraq succeeded in containing the epidemic on the eastern side of the desert. By the end of November 1923, all restrictive measures were removed in Syrian territory.[99] The 1927 epidemic, on the other hand, had a more profound and longer-term effect on the monitoring of cross-border mobility.

In mid-July 1927, numerous cases of cholera were reported in the Iranian cities of Abadan and Mohammarah near the Persian Gulf and subsequently in Basra. The British authorities in Iraq immediately took the same measures that were implemented a few years earlier to limit the spread of the epidemic northwards. Despite these measures, it was clear to the various French and British officials, whether in Iraq, Egypt, Palestine or Syria, that the intense traffic on the new direct desert route from Baghdad to Damascus was a prime channel for the spread of the disease. As the Inspector General of Health Service in Iraq noted on 29 July 1927, the 'overland route from Iraq [was] a possible route of entry of cholera from India to the Mediterranean and so to Europe'.[100] The Syrian Desert, which had been regarded until then as a '*tombeau des épidémies'* ('tomb of epidemics') because of the length of the journey by caravan had now turned into a potential route of propagation with the development of

[96] Ibid., pp. 58–63.
[97] SHD/GR 4 H 100/2, 'Bulletin trimestriel du Sandjak de Deir ez-Zor' by *Chef des Services de Renseignement des Confins de l'Euphrate*, June–August 1923.
[98] SHD/GR 4 H 100/3, *Service des Renseignements*, Deir ez-Zor, Post message No. 8, 10 October 1923.
[99] SHD/GR 4 H 63/5, *Service des Renseignements*, Beirut, Bulletin No. 565, 5 December 1925.
[100] LON, R981/12B/49676/61055, Office of the Inspector General of Health Service to Thomson (*Conseil Sanitaire Maritime et Quarantenaire d'Egypte*), Baghdad, 29 July 1927.

motorised transport.[101] In this connection, in August 1927, the Iraqi Ministry of Interior sent a detailed report on the nature, scale and organisation of traffic along the Baghdad–Damascus route to the *Conseil Sanitaire Maritime et Quarantenaire d'Egypte*, an international institution based in Alexandria, which was responsible for issuing alerts on epidemics as well as collecting and circulating information.[102] The Baghdad–Damascus route was considered the main channel of propagation on land routes, just as the Red Sea and the Suez Canal had been among maritime routes since the second half of the nineteenth century.

Despite their discursive emphasis on the 'defence' of the French mandated territories, the French authorities did not lose sight of the imperative to preserve the traffic flow. While sharing the view that transdesert traffic was a potential avenue for the spread of cholera epidemics between India and Europe, they also placed considerable importance on maintaining cross-border traffic, as explained by Dr Duguet, who was responsible for overseeing the management of the epidemic.

> Au point de vue économique et politique, une de ces voies de communication présente un intérêt primordial: c'est la route Bagdad à Damas-Beyrouth, tronçon terminal de la route terrestres des Indes qui, partant de Bassorah, draine toute la circulation automobile de Mésopotamie vers le port de Beyrouth. Le maintien de cette route présentait donc une nécessité économique capitale, mais aussi un danger de contamination.[103]

In this context, the strategy adopted in Iraq and Syria sought to avoid the complete interruption of cross-border traffic, relying instead on the organisation of a vaccination campaign, the channelling of travellers along certain routes and the implementation of health checkpoints. Dr Duguet wrote a detailed report at the end of the epidemic, which provides insights on the changing controls imposed on cross-border mobility between July 1927 and January 1928.

At the end of July 1927, when the first cholera cases were reported in Basra, the French decided to channel the flow of travellers on the main routes between Iraq and Syria, namely

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[101] LON, R5873/8A/2674/2674, Duguet (Inspector General, High Commission's Hygiene and Public Health Services) to the Medical Director of the Hygiene Section at the League of Nations, Beirut 17 February 1928, p. 6.
[102] On the *Conseil Sanitaire Maritime et Quarantenaire d'Egypte* (CSMQ), see Sylvia Chiffoleau, 'Entre initiation au jeu international, pouvoir colonial et mémoire nationale : le Conseil Sanitaire d'Alexandrie, 1865–1938', *Égypte/Monde arabe* No. 4 (2007), pp. 55–74. For the report on transdesert traffic, see LON, R981/12B/49676/61055, the Iraqi Ministry of Interior to CSMQ, Baghdad, 18 August 1927.
[103] LON, R5873/8A/2674/2674, Inspector Duguet to the Medical Director of the Hygiene Section at the League of Nations, Beirut, 17 February 1928, p. 6. Translation: 'From an economic and political point of view, one of these communication routes is of primary interest: it is the Baghdad–Damascus–Beirut route, the terminal section of the overland route from India which, starting from Basra, drains all the motor traffic from Mesopotamia towards the port of Beirut. Maintaining this route was therefore a major economic imperative, but also presented a danger of contamination.'

Baghdad–Damas, Baghdad–Aleppo and Mosul–Aleppo and to establish checkpoints along the other tracks, where travellers were turned away. In addition, they intensified their efforts to build lazarets and quarantine stations on the various routes. The quarantine station at Deraa, in southern Syria, which had been operational since 1926, enabled the control of travellers leaving or transiting through Syria on their way to Palestine. In addition, a new lazaret was built at Torra near Damascus, where the medical officers could check travellers coming from Iraq via the direct route as well as via Palmyra from August 1927. 'In order to prevent automobiles from taking any other route than the authorized ones', wrote Duguet, 'the main tracks leading to Damascus [were] cut by wide trenches and made impassable to cars.'[104] The French authorities also began the construction of quarantine stations in Aleppo and Deir ez-Zor, which were only completed in 1928. In the interim, they organised several sanitary checkpoints in Aleppo, Homs and Tripoli (Figure 14). The infrastructure and practices of sanitary control did not shut down traffic, resulting instead in a 'partial closure' of the Syrian–Iraqi border, as the French High Commissioner pointed out. As the epidemic approached the Iraqi capital, health officials from Syria, Iraq, Palestine and Egypt met in Baghdad on 6 October 1927 to coordinate controls at the quarantine stations and jointly organise the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca. Quarantine measures were extended to five days for travellers bound for Syria, even if they were vaccinated. On 21 October, when cases of cholera were reported in Hit and Ramadi, the French authorities established a new checkpoint in Abu Kemal and banned all traffic on the direct Baghdad–Damascus route. Moreover, on the Syrian side, the French established mobile police forces to supervise the borderland and prevent pedestrians and car passengers from leaving the main routes and thus circumventing the controls.[105]

[104] LON, R5873/8A/2674/2674, 'Rapport relatif à l'organisation et au fonctionnement des services quarantenaires et de police sanitaire maritime et terrestre du Haut-Commissariat à l'occasion de l'épidémie de choléra d'Irak (juillet à décembre 1927', by Dr Duguet, p. 9. Original French: 'Afin d'empêcher les automobiles de prendre toutes autres voies que celles autorisées, les pistes principales aboutissant à Damas sont coupées par de larges tranchées et rendues impraticables aux voitures.'

[105] Quote: LON, R981/12B/49676/61055, the French High Commissioner to the president of *Conseil Sanitaire Maritime et Quarantenaire d'Egypte*, Beirut, 6 August 1927. In the original French: 'fermeture partielle'. See also Sylvia Chiffoleau, 'Entre bienfaisance, contrôle des populations et agenda international', pp. 19–22; LON, R5873/8A/2674/2674, Inspector Duguet to the Medical Director of the Hygiene Section at the League of Nations, Beirut, 17 February 1928; LON, R2314/6A/6774/655, British report submitted to the League of Nations on the administration of Iraq, 1927, pp. 85–86.

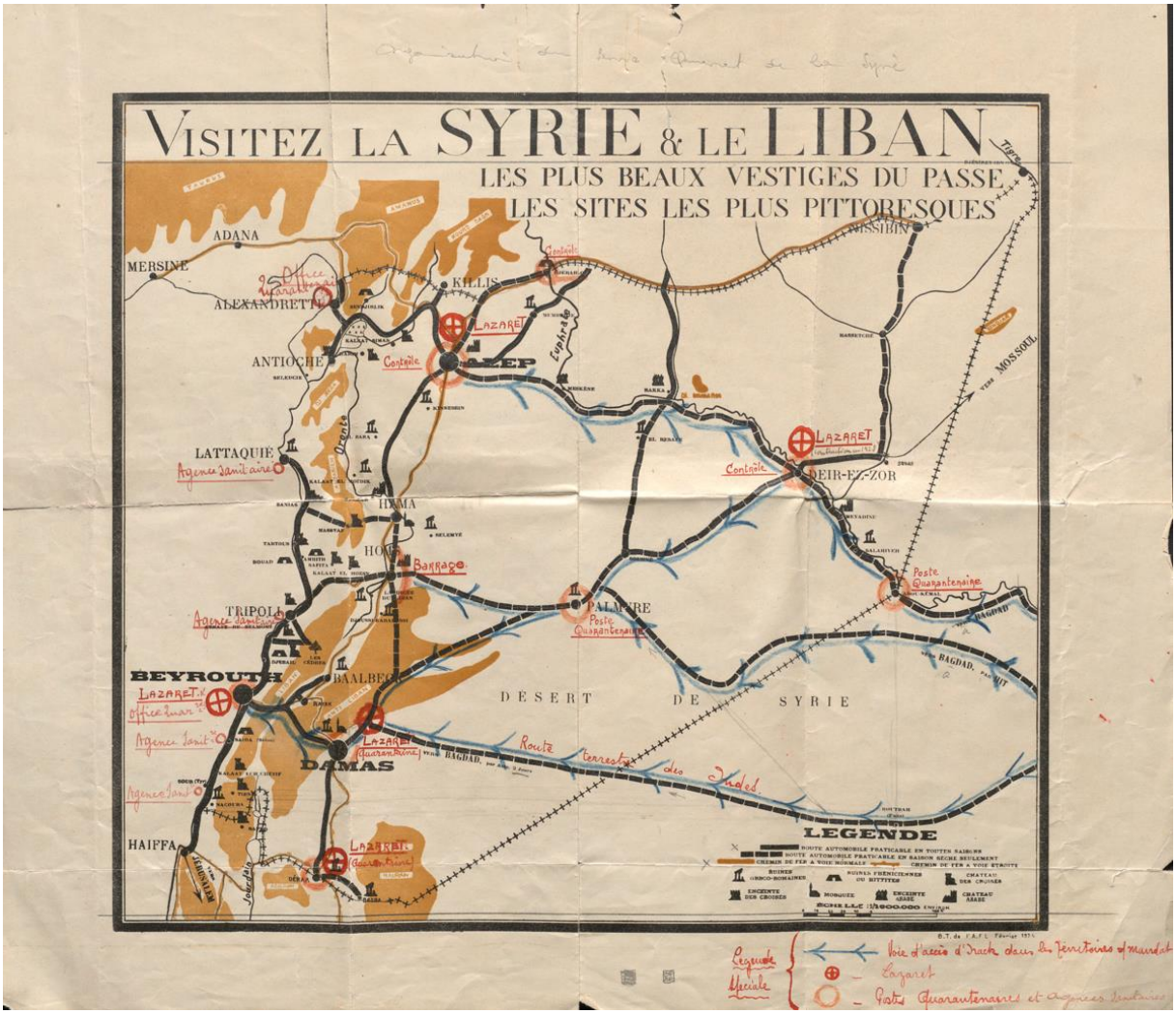

FIGURE 14: TOURIST MAP OF SYRIA (1923) WITH HAND-DRAWN QUARANTINE STATIONS OVERLAID

Image credit: United Nations Archives at Geneva, R5873/8A/2674/2674 (Courtesy of the United Nations Archives).

In addition, the Mandate authorities required all travellers wishing to leave Iraq for Syria to undergo a double vaccination against cholera. In Iraq, passports for Syria were endorsed only after production of a certificate of vaccination. In addition, vaccination was imposed on the drivers of transport companies operating between Baghdad and Damascus. At the height of the epidemics, the French authorities also undertook to vaccinate the populations of the Euphrates Valley as well as the populations of the villages located along the Baghdad–Damascus route and in the Ghouta, an oasis surrounding Damascus.[106] In this way, the authorities aimed to establish a safe corridor through the Syrian–Iraqi borderlands.

[106] Ibid. See also LON, R2307/6A/4361/536, 'Rapport à la Société des Nations sur la situation de la Syrie et du Liban', 1927, pp. 69–70.

The last infected person in Iraq was registered on 22 December, and by the end of December 1927, no new cases of cholera had been reported in Syria. The main measures and restrictions on cross-border movements were lifted as of 20 January 1928, although for some time afterwards, the Mandate authorities maintained medical supervision of travellers as well as the ban on the transport of certain foodstuffs. The success of the operation was attributed to transnational collaboration by Ponsot, the French High Commissioner, who affirmed the importance of its continuation in the future.[107] As Sylvia Chiffoleau has rightly pointed out, the cholera epidemics of 1927 reminded the Mandate powers of the need for 'coordinated action' from Baghdad to Damascus.[108] In short, for just over five months, cross-border mobility had been channelled along the main transdesert routes, subject to much stricter control and conditioned on the holding of a vaccination certificate. In addition to the restrictions on transdesert mobility, the Mandate authorities also implemented a series of measures (roadblocks, trenches, mobile police) to reduce the permeability of the Syrian–Iraqi border. However, the border was never closed to traffic. Collaboration between the political and health authorities in Syria and Iraq, but also those in other countries was aimed at ensuring that cross-border mobility could be maintained under safe and regulated conditions.

At the same time, the cholera epidemics of 1923 and 1927, together with a plague epidemic in 1926, prompted the Mandate authorities to establish a permanent system for monitoring mobility in times of epidemics. As Dr Duguet, explained in January 1928, the construction of the four lazarets and quarantine stations in Deraa (1926), Damas-Thora (1927), Deir ez-Zor (1928) and Aleppo (1928) was aimed at shaping 'a permanent land-based defensive network' ('*un réseau défensif terrestre permanent*') in the French mandated territories.[109] Subsequently, the response to new cholera outbreaks was swift, thanks to this infrastructure of quarantine posts and the experience of past controls. For example, in the summer of 1931 when a new cholera epidemic broke out in southern Iraq, the French Mandate authorities promptly adopted the same measures applied four year earlier.[110] Once again, the restrictions on cross-

[107] CADC, 50CPCOM382, telegrams from High Commissioner Ponsot to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Beirut, dated 21 October 1927, 3 December 1927 and 21 January 1928.
[108] Sylvia Chiffoleau, 'Entre bienfaisance, contrôle des populations et agenda international', p. 107.
[109] LON, R5873/8A/2674/2674, Inspector Duguet to the Medical Director of the Hygiene Section at the League of Nations, Beirut, 17 February 1928.
[110] CADN, 36PO/1/411, Delegate General of the High Commissioner to the French Ambassador in Ankara, Beirut, 28 August 1931. See also the three articles published in *Les Échos de Damas* in September 1931, which detailed measures taken that were aimed to reassure the public. 'Sommes-nous protégés contre le choléra', *Les Échos de Damas*, 2/3/4 September 1931. https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k58269540/f2.item (accessed 23 May 2022).

border mobility were maintained for a few months before being lifted in January 1932, when no further cholera cases were reported in Syria.[111]

In summary, the French authorities acquired experience in defending their mandated territories against outbreaks of epidemics in Iraq. Combined with surveillance and vaccination measures, the infrastructure of quarantine stations and checkpoints that could be mobilised on demand enabled them to close and reopen the border in response to these outbreaks. This section has shown that border infrastructure and techniques of control were adapted in response to crisis situations in such a way as to enable more or less tight control over cross-border movements depending on the circumstances. However, even when control of the Syrian–Iraqi border was the tightest, traffic still flowed across the desert. The Mandate states made sure that transdesert mobility was maintained at all times.

That said, although mobility on the Syrian–Iraqi border was maintained even in times of crisis, not all kinds of movement were permitted. In the following section I examine more closely the impact of the new border regime on various groups and individuals, showing that the controls on cross-border mobility were applied in a selective way. Furthermore, while highlighting the progressive criminalisation of various cross-border movements, I discuss how state officials applied the category of 'undesirables' to many groups and individuals.

The Catch-All Category of 'Undesirables'

On 26 December 1923, the Director of the *Sûreté Générale* lamented the presence in Beirut of beggars and vagabonds coming into the city mainly from the Lebanese mountains or from neighbouring Palestine as well as foreign travellers whose motive for staying in Beirut was unclear or 'suspicious'. He therefore recommended the adoption of regulations to prevent these 'undesirable' persons ('*indésirables'*) from entering Syria and submitted proposals for better 'screening' of foreign travellers. Firstly, he noted, as a reminder to the authorities, German, Austrian and Armenian nationals had to provide special justification of their motives to obtain a visa. Secondly, he stated that travellers of other nationalities should be treated differently depending on whether they were tourists, government officials or according to whether they had sufficient 'means of subsistence' or were from families of 'modest means' and seeking employment. For the latter category, a special investigation should be carried out

[111] NARA, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Asia, 1910–1929, microfilm roll 18, File 890G.00, U.S. Consul Sloan to the Secretary of State, Baghdad, 15 January 1932.

before granting them permission.[112] Evidently, the Director of the *Sûreté Générale* considered those whom he suspected of becoming potential destitutes, and therefore an economic burden to the state, as undesirable travellers. In the post-war period, the term '*indésirable'* appeared frequently in French correspondence and reports, sometimes applied to particular nationalities, sometimes to certain categories of travellers and sometimes to individuals. Moreover, it was not just state officials who demanded stricter screening of those permitted to enter or reside in the French mandated territories, as illustrated by an article published in the Beirut newspaper, *L'Orient*, in September 1931. In this article, the author called on the authorities to get rid of 'dubious individuals, who had flown in from the Mediterranean'.[113] At the same time, this propensity to consider certain migrants and travellers as 'undesirable' was not unique to the French Mandate states; quite the contrary.

In the post-war era, the Turkish government drew up a list of 150 'undesirables', which included many Kurdish leaders and various political activists and suspected opponents. From mid-1925 onwards, the French authorities agreed to forbid them access to the French mandated territories and to keep those already present away from the Syrian–Turkish border.[114] In Mandate Palestine, the British authorities also sought to prevent unwanted immigrants from entering Palestinian territory. These potential immigrants included a wide range of people described by Lauren Banko as 'vagabonds, the physically and mentally ill, the unemployed, prostitutes, criminals, and bandits'.[115] A record compiled by the Egyptian consulate in Smyrna (Izmir) in 1926 under the name '*Registre des indésirables de Smyrne*' contained the profiles (sometimes accompanied by a photograph) of more than a hundred individuals, both women and men, suspected of posing a political, economic or moral threat. The record included the profiles of political activists, communists, prostitutes and pimps, swindlers and unemployed people.[116] As Edhem Eldem has pointed out, it reflected the Egyptian consulate's mistrust of certain highly mobile and unattached individuals who travelled across the Eastern

[112] CADN, 1SL/1/V/846, Lieutenant-Colonel Bucheton (Director, *Sûreté Générale*) to High Commissioner Weygand, Beirut, 26 December 1923.
[113] CADN, 1SL/1/V/842, M. D., 'Le "nettoyage" de Beyrouth: Pour l'expulsion des étrangers indésirables', *L'Orient*, 16 September 1931. Original French: 'individus louches, accourus des ports de la Méditerranée'.
[114] Seda Altuğ, 'The Turkish-Syrian Border and Politics of Difference in Turkey and Syria (1921–1939)', pp. 63–68; Seda Altuğ and Benjamin Thomas White, 'Frontières et pouvoir d'État', pp. 91–104; Soheila Mameli-Ghaderi, 'Le tracé de la frontière entre la Syrie et la Turquie (1921-1929)', *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains* 207:3 (2002), p. 131. See also CADC, 50CPCOM310, High Commissioner Sarrail to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Beirut, 25 May 1925.
[115] Lauren Banko, 'Keeping Out the "Undesirable Elements"', p. 1156.
[116] SALT Research, 'Registre des indésirables. Consulat Royal d'Egypte à Smyrne', 15 February 1926 https://archives.saltresearch.org/handle/123456789/115951 (accessed 23 May 2022).

Mediterranean, whether by choice or coercion, whose nationalities were unclear to the Egyptian consular authorities.[117]

In more general terms, historians have shown that the term 'undesirable' was increasingly used by state officials in the late nineteenth century in many parts of the world, reflecting a more suspicious attitude towards migration. As early as the 1880s, the United States introduced restrictive immigration policies, while similar regulations were adopted in various settler colonies during the same period. As Alison Bashford and Catie Gilchrist have shown, colonial laws on migration in the British Empire informed similar discussions in Britain as well. In the early twentieth century, the British government decided to restrict the entry of a wide range of unwanted immigrants. The Aliens Act, passed in 1905, preceded a larger trend that became prevalent in Europe after the First World War, with the reintroduction of passports and the implementation of more restrictive immigration policies.[118] In sum, the beginning of the twentieth century saw a proliferation of measures introduced in Europe that were aimed at differentiating between approved migrants and those considered dangerous, undesirable or poor. At the same time, the term 'undesirable' was also used in the early twentieth century to refer to certain categories of people within national borders, marking a continuation of states' growing mistrust of 'nomads' and 'vagrants' since the mid-nineteenth century.[119]

The Mandate authorities in Iraq and Syria also tended to regard as undesirable many individuals who travelled between Iraq and Syria as a result of the development of transdesert transport. In April 1931, Fathie Ben Mustapha, an Iraqi from Mosul who worked as a coachman and had no permanent address was expelled from Syria. The expulsion order stated, without giving any details, that the man was considered 'undesirable', as he was 'likely to disturb public order and safety'.[120] In October of the same year, in a letter addressed to the High Commissioner

[117] Edhem Eldem, 'The Undesirables of Smyrna, 1926', *Mediterranean Historical Review* 24:2 (2009), pp. 223–227.
[118] Lauren Banko, 'Keeping Out the 'Undesirable Elements'', pp. 1155–1156; Alison Bashford and Catie Gilchrist, 'The Colonial History of the 1905 Aliens Act', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 40:3 (2012), pp. 409–437; Emmanuel Blanchard, 'Les "indésirables". Passé et présent d'une catégorie d'action publique', *Figures de l'étranger. Quelles représentations pour quelles politiques ?* (Paris: GISTI, 2013), pp. 16–26; John Torpey, 'The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Passport System', in *Documenting Individual Identity: The Development of State Practices in the Modern World*, eds. Jane Caplan and John Torpey (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 256–270. For an analysis of the term 'undesirable' in the colonial context, see Andrew MacDonald, 'Forging the Frontiers: Travellers and Documents on the South Africa–Mozambique Border, 1890s–1940s', *Kronos* No. 40 (2014), pp. 154–177.
[119] Emmanuel Blanchard, 'Les "indésirables".', p. 18. On the emergence of the category of 'vagabond' in nineteenth-century France, see Jean-François Wagniart, *Le vagabond à la fin du XIXe siècle* (Paris: Belin, 1999).
[120] CADN, 1SL/1/V/849, Decree 30/I 'portant expulsion des Etats du Levant sous Mandat Français du nommé Fathie Ben Moustapha', 14 April 1931.

for Syria and Lebanon, the French *chargé d'affaires* in Iraq, Paul Lépissier, bemoaned the number of such travellers using the transdesert routes.

> Les communications toujours plus faciles entre la Syrie et l'Irak valent à ce consulat les visites fréquentes de Français ou de Syriens, voire de Françaises peu désirables qui sont pour ce poste causes de graves ennuis et il serait à souhaiter qu'un contrôle plus sévère s'exerçat [sic] dans ce domaine. [121]

One of these 'undesirable' visitors, he added, was a certain Jacob Bercovitch who was currently being detained at the French consulate in Baghdad before being expelled to Lebanon. According to his information, the man was born in Cairo on 30 January 1886 and had worked as a typographer before becoming a sub-officer in the French Army in the Eastern Mediterranean (more precisely in the Spahis). He had arrived in Baghdad four months earlier, holding a passport issued in Aleppo on 20 June 1930, having promised the driver that a relative in Iraq would pay the cost of transport on his arrival. Since then, he had committed numerous offences, which the consul detailed as follows:

> Il a fait depuis cette époque l'objet d'environ 15 plaintes pour abus de confiance ou grivèlerie et de 3 plaintes pour escroquerie sur promesse de mariage. Il a reconnu en outre être venu en Irak pour se livrer à la traite des blanches, mais a dit n'être dans ce commerce que le correspondant d'un pourvoyeur de Beyrouth qui serait le frère du tenancier du Café de la Poste, sur la Place des Canons.[122]

Jacob Bercovitch was above all a crook.[123] For Paul Lépissier, however, tighter controls on cross-border traffic between Syria and Iraq were also necessary to prevent the entry of certain 'undesirable' French women, not to say women he considered to be prostitutes. At the time, French and British Mandate officials were very keen to monitor the movement of prostitutes across their territories. This concern also became an international one, as the League

[121] CADC, 50CPCOM625, Paul Lépissier (French *chargé d'affaires* in Iraq) to the French High Commissioner, Baghdad, 3 October 1931. Translation: 'The growing ease of movements between Syria and Iraq results in the frequent visits to this consulate by French and Syrian nationals, or even undesirable French women, who cause serious problems for this post, and it is to be hoped that stricter control will be exercised with regard to this matter.'
[122] Ibid. Translation: 'Since that time, he has been the subject of about 15 complaints for breach of trust or fraud and 3 complaints for swindling on the promise of marriage. He also admitted having come to Iraq to engage in white slavery, but said that he was only the correspondent of a Beirut procurer who was said to be the brother of the owner of the Café de la Poste, on the Place des Canons.'
[123] The aforementioned 1926 *Registre des indésirables de Smyrne* mentions a certain 'Jacques Bercovitz'. The description reads: 'Palestinien d'origine parti pour la France en 1923 accusé dans une faillite avec escroquerie dans le magasin Miniya dont il était un associé parti avant que les mesures eut été prises pour l'arrêter.' To date, the sources I have found do not clarify whether this is the same man as the one mentioned in Paul Lépissier's letter, although it is plausible. SALT Research, 'Registre des indésirables. Consulat Royal d'Egypte à Smyrne', 15 February 1926, ALT00200039: https://archives.saltresearch.org/handle/123456789/115951 (accessed 23 May 2022).

of Nations sent missions to the Middle East to inquire into the trafficking of women of mainly European descent. The so-called 'white slave trade' attracted widespread attention, although only a few such cases of forced migration of women were properly documented. Among the reasons that heightened this concern was the fear that 'racial' mixing would result from such circulations.[124] In 1932, the League of Nations constituted a second mission, which travelled from Japan to the Mediterranean, stopping in Baghdad, Damascus and Beirut to investigate potential trafficking on a national and international scale. The report stated that many foreign prostitutes were present in Iraq, including Syrian women who had taken the transdesert routes and entered Iraq clandestinely through many different points, believing that they could make a better living in Baghdad.[125] However, as Liat Kozma points out, while this report probably contained some truth, its value remains questionable, especially as the League of Nations experts did not interview any locals during their mission. Moreover, the reports were often erroneous or exaggerated in order to justify measures of stricter control imposed on these women. And indeed, the regulation of prostitution and the control of prostitutes' movements increased throughout the interwar period.[126]

The fear that 'white' women would become involved in prostitution led the French and British Mandate authorities to monitor and restrict cross-border movements of cabaret and music-hall performers as well. The British were the first to ban European artists from entering Iraq in the mid-1920s, as the British consul in Beirut explained in July 1927 to the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. Sometime earlier, he had granted a visa to Iraq to 'a respectable English music hall artiste' and had received a reminder from the High Commissioner for Iraq that it was 'undesirable' for such a woman to come and perform in Iraq. As he explained, the reason was to safeguard the reputation of the British people as a whole. 'The disadvantage of having British women performing before native audiences with the risk of worse things to come, is a real one from the point of view of our prestige […]', he wrote, recalling the case of

[124] Francesca Biancani, 'International Migration and Sex Work in Early Twentieth Century Cairo', in Liat Kozma, Cyrus Schayegh and Avner Wishnitzer (eds.), *A Global Middle East*, pp. 118–121; Liat Kozma, *Global Women, Colonial Ports*, pp. 19–24. On the production of expertise in the Middle Eastern Mandates and the League of Nations' connection to it, see Philippe Bourmaud, Norig Neveu and Chantal Verdeil, 'Les mandats, canaux de la mise en expertise du monde colonial', in Philippe Bourmaud, Norig Neveu and Chantal Verdeil (eds.), *Experts et expertise dans les mandats de la société des nations : figures, champs, outils* (Paris: Presses de l'Inalco, 2020), pp. 9–54.

[125] For the League of Nations reports, see LON, R3062/11B/38154/38364, 'Extension of the Enquiry on Traffic in Women and Children to the East: Report Concerning Iraq', Geneva, 31 July 1932, p. 16a; R3062/11B/38154/38797, 'Extension de l'enquête sur la traite des femmes et des enfants en Orient: rapport concernant les territoires du Liban sous mandat français', Geneva, 31 July 1932, p. 27. Both reports stated that these women crossed the border clandestinely.

[126] Liat Kozma, *Global Women, Colonial Ports*, pp. 22, 47–78, 95.

two British women in Syria in which the British consul had been compelled to put pressure on the local authorities to deport them. The British, he continued, had settled the issue in Iraq by prohibiting European artists from entering the country to practice their profession. He hoped that similar measures would be applied in Syria and Lebanon.[127]

Iraq was not the only country where European artists were denied entry. In the interwar period, similar restrictions were adopted in all countries under French and British administration.[128] In 1928, the French High Commissioner expressed a similar position to the British, stating that the presence of French artists created a bad image of the French.

> Par une généralisation trop facile certains esprits qui nous sont peu favorables ne manquent pas de se répandre en commentaire déplacés touchant l'honorabilité de la femme française. Il en résulte pour le prestige français et pour la Puissance Mandataire un préjudice certain.[129]

In the end, however, the French did not impose a total ban on French artists in Lebanon and Syria; instead, they decided to introduce a stringent selection process, entailing careful checking of the status of each applicant.[130] Decree 2414 of 14 February 1929 stipulated that no music hall artist could enter the French Mandate states without prior authorisation from the High Commission, which would only grant visas to artists who had practiced their profession for at least three years and could produce a certificate verifying their previous employment.[131] As historian Camila Pastor has shown, distrust of foreign *artistes* increased in the 1930s and during the Second World War in the French Mandate territories, resulting in numerous restrictive regulations and police measures aimed at safeguarding 'French prestige'.[132]

Trustworthy or suspect?

Whereas the classification of women artists as 'undesirable' migrants made it relatively easy to deny them entry through the visa system, the Mandate states were keen to prevent a

[127] TNA, CO 732/28/14, British Consul Satow to the Principal Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Beirut, 27 July 1927.
[128] Similar regulations existed in Palestine and Egypt in 1927. TNA, CO 732/28/14, the High Commissioner for Palestine to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Jerusalem, 15 September 1927; British Residency to Austen Chamberlain, Ramleh, 26 August 1927.
[129] CADC, 50CPCOM310, the French High Commissioner to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Beirut, 28 January 1928.
[130] CADC, 50CPCOM544, delegate of the French High Commission to *Union Artistique de France*, Beirut, 10 August 1931 as well as the French High Commissioner to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Beirut, 30 December 1931.
[131] CADC, 50CPCOM544, Decree 2414 of 14 February 1929.
[132] Camila Pastor De Maria Campos, 'Performers or Prostitutes?: *Artistes* during the French Mandate over Syria and Lebanon, 1921–1946', *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 13:2 (2017), pp. 301–307. See also Nessim Znaien, 'La prostitution à Beyrouth sous le mandat français (1920-1943)', *Genre & Histoire* No. 11 (2012), p. 4.

very diverse range of people from entering their territories, whose 'undesirability' was not automatically apparent. Thus, border controls relied heavily on the identification of 'suspect' travellers, both in consulates prior to travel as well as at Syrian and Iraqi border posts. As a note written in 1925 by the French High Commissioner pointed out, anyone arriving at a Lebanese or Syrian border post whose passport was marked 'without authorisation to return' was to be denied entry, as it meant that their home authority did not want them to return: 'In most cases this indicates that the person concerned is an undesirable person whom we should not bother with', the note explained.[133] Suspicion also led consular agents to pass on information to border officers or Mandate authorities on travellers and migrants who were to be checked on arrival. On 2 May 1925, French Consul Maigret informed High Commissioner Sarrail that he had just granted a *laissez-passer* for Syria to a man called Mohamed Jilali Belhezil, who claimed that he was from Morocco and stated that he was unable to present identification, because he had been robbed of all his belongings on the way. Maigret recommended that this man should be searched upon arriving at a checkpoint in Syria. The High Commissioner transmitted the message to the *Service des Renseignements*.[134]

Those deemed suspect could also be placed under close surveillance.[135] In October 1933, for example, two Palestinians from Nablus applied in Palestine for a French transit visa to travel to Iraq through Syria. One of them, named Akram Zeiter, was a member of the Independence Party (*Hizb al-Istiqlal*) in Palestine. The French consul in Jerusalem granted them transit visas, but as both were known political activists, he marked the visa with a sign indicating that they were suspicious travellers to be kept under discreet police surveillance. Yet this did not deter Akram Zeiter from being a source of annoyance to the French. Although he was not allowed to stay in Syria, he stopped for a while in Damascus where he gave a very virulent speech against the colonial powers at a ceremony in memory of King Faysal. After he left Syria for Iraq, the French took steps to instruct all consulates abroad that this man would henceforth be banned from entering the French mandated territories.[136] Suspicion was a basic element of border controls, as is also evident from the reports of the *Sûreté Générale* in the French

[133] CADN, 1SL/1/V/442, note from the French High Commissioner, dated 26 April 1925, sent to border officials. Original French: 'Cette mention indique dans la plupart des cas que l'intéressé est un indésirable dont on a intérêt à ne pas s'embarrasser.'
[134] CADN, 1SL/1/V/849, French Consul Maigret to High Commissioner Sarrail, Baghdad, 2 May 1925 and Note by the French *Service des Renseignements du Levant*, Beirut, June 1925.
[135] CADN, 1SL/1/V/849, Note by Commandant Dentz (*Service des Renseignements*) to the Director of the *Sûreté Générale*, Beirut, 30 December 1924.
[136] CADN, 1SL/1/V/844, Veber (delegate of the High Commissioner to the French High Commissioner, Damascus, 19 October 1933; Director of the *Sûreté Générale* to *Cabinet Politique*, Beirut, 21 October 1933; the French consul in Jerusalem to the French High Commissioner, 15 November 1933.

mandated territories. The reports indicate the number of people identified as 'suspects' by the various posts of the *Sûreté Générale*, with their names and details. The *Sûreté Générale* of the state of Damascus, for example, registered between 10 and 30 suspicious persons per quarter between 1929 and 1931 and up to 60 in the second quarter of 1931.[137]

As Lauren Banko has shown with regard to Mandate Palestine, what guided the labelling of certain travellers and migrants as 'undesirables' was the suspicion of their bad intentions, bad morals or lack of money.[138] The regime of border controls between Syria and Iraq, like that on the Palestinian border, confirms Ronen Shamir's argument about the emergence since the nineteenth century of a 'global mobility regime' based on a 'paradigm of suspicion', that is, 'the classification of individuals and groups according to principles of perceived threats and risks'.[139]

Blacklisting unwanted travellers

As we have seen with regard to the highway robberies, state agents on the ground collaborated on a daily basis across the Syrian–Iraqi border. Similar instances of cooperation can be observed in the arrest of criminals and suspects. One such example was the arrest in Anah (Iraq), in 1929, of a Syrian suspected of having committed a crime in Sukhna (Syria). The man was imprisoned before being deported to the Syrian border post of Abu Kemal. Moreover, the Iraqi police authorities transmitted the minutes of the interrogations conducted in Anah to the Syrian police.[140] Inter-state cooperation was also strengthened to enhance the effectiveness of efforts aimed at preventing the movements of criminals and other unwanted travellers between Syria and Iraq, but also more widely across the region. Following a meeting held in Cairo in February 1927, the police forces in Lebanon, Syria, Palestine and Egypt concluded an agreement for fostering close cooperation in the surveillance of communists, criminals and suspicious individuals, which was extended to Iraq in October 1927.[141] Moreover, in late 1929, the extradition of criminals between Iraq and Syria was formalised through a provisional convention.[142] Signed in Baghdad on 23 May 1929 and in Beirut on 6 May 1929,

[137] CADN, 1SL/1/V/842, quarterly reports of the *Sûreté Générale* between 1929 and 1931.
[138] Lauren Banko, 'Keeping Out the "Undesirable Elements"', pp. 1153–1180.
[139] Ronen Shamir, 'Without Borders?', pp. 197–217.
[140] CADN, 1SL/1/V/846, Intelligence Bulletin of the *Service des Renseignements*, Abu Kemal, 7 February 1929.
[141] CADN, 1SL/1/V/842, 'Rapport sur l'activité des services de la Sûreté Générale dans les Etats sous Mandat Français', 1927 as well as 'Rapport sur l'activité de la Sûreté Générale et des polices des Etats sous Mandat Français', 1928.
[142] Extradition was initiated during an earlier period 'as a matter of convenience' (*'à titre de complaisance'*). CADN, 1SL/1/V/440, Message from the French High Commissioner to the *Envoyé extraordinaire* in Damascus, Beirut, 27 August 1926.

the convention—which would later be replaced by a final act—required extradition by both parties of those persons prosecuted or convicted for a crime committed in Syria/Lebanon or in Iraq for which the sentence in both territories exceeded one year of imprisonment.[143]

Another measure of cross-border cooperation aimed at preventing the movements of unwanted travellers was the establishment and exchange of blacklists between the post-Ottoman states. From January 1927 onwards, the *Sûreté Générale* in the French mandated territories produced a monthly *Bulletin de Police Criminelle* containing the names and details of all wanted criminals, which was distributed in Syria and Lebanon as well as in neighbouring states. At the end of 1927, the bulletin contained 3,747 entries, which expanded steadily over the following years, increasing to 7,141 names at the end of 1929, 14.865 at the end of 1934 and 21,597 by 31 December 1938.[144] Consulates abroad could refuse visas for Syria to those whose names appeared on the list and thus prevent 'undesirable Iraqis from entering Syrian territory', as noted by the French consul in Mosul in February 1933.[145] The list of wanted criminals was also passed on to the *Sûreté Générale* and the *Service des Renseignements* and disseminated at border posts. In May 1933, a pair of Syrian nationals was escorted back to the border post at Abu Kemal by an Iraqi policeman after they had arrived in Anah without passports and been turned away from Iraq. In Abu Kemal, the Syrian border authorities noticed that similar names appeared in the *Bulletin de Police Criminelle* and decided to transfer the two Syrians to Deir ez-Zor for further verification of their identity.[146]

In the same vein, state administrators also compiled lists of persons deemed undesirable. This practice apparently became more common in the 1930s, at least on the Syrian side of the border.[147] The archives of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Nantes hold an extract from a record from 1933. Originating from the Iraqi consulate in Beirut, the document lists various 'undesirable' persons banned from Iraq, together with notes from the *Sûreté Générale* of Syria and Lebanon about some of the individuals concerned. In this case, the persons on the list were mainly political activists: many Kurdish notables and militants, including several contributors

[143] LON, R2315/6A/18265/655, 'Provisional Convention between Iraq and Syria for the Extradition of Criminals, signed at Bagdad, 23 May, Beirut, 6 May 1929'.
[144] CADN, 1SL/1/V/842, 'Rapport sur l'activité des services de la Sûreté Générale dans les ESFM pour l'année 1927', pp.14–15 and a similar report for 1929, p.3; CADN, 1SL/1/V/843, annual report of the Sûreté Générale for 1934, pp. 2–3 ; CADN 844, annual report of the Sûreté Générale for 1938, p. 5.
[145] CADN, 1SL/1/V/842, French consul in Mosul to the French High Commissioner, Mosul, 11 February 1933.
[146] CADN, 1SL/1/V/842, the French High Commissioner to the deputy delegate of the High Commissioner for the Euphrates territories, Deir ez-Zor, 10 May 1933.
[147] As the High Commissioner explained to the French consul in Adana in 1931, the French had not kept any ꞅecord of undesirables and deportees in recent years. He sent him instead a list of wanted criminals. CADN, 1SL/1/V/440, General Secretary of the High Commission to the French consul in Adana, Beirut, 2 December 1931.

to the Kurdish magazine *Hawar*, leaders of the Syrian Revolt, foreign spies and Armenians.[148] As with the *Bulletin de Police Criminelle*, these lists enabled police and border officials to check whether people arriving at border posts or found undocumented in the mandated territories had already been previously registered as suspects. For example, an expulsion order was issued in March 1933 against an Iranian national who had entered Syria with a group of Assyrian–Chaldean refugees after it was discovered that his name appeared in a list of 'undesirables'.[149]

In 1934, the exchange of such lists between the French Mandate authorities and the Iraqi authorities was formalised after a meeting attended by the respective police chiefs of Syria and Iraq, as will be further discussed below. They agreed to share these lists with the consular representatives of both countries.[150] Although the mutual understanding between the two chiefs of police, lauded by Mr Bouchède in 1934, facilitated collaboration during a certain period of time, the practice of exchanging information on unwanted travellers was gradually discontinued. In 1938, these chiefs' successors reopened the discussion at the request of the Iraqi government, which wanted to strengthen the control of certain groups such as 'anarchists, conspirators, terrorists and gang members'.[151] The general security services agencies of the two countries agreed once again to strengthen their cooperation in order to monitor the cross-border movements of 'undesirables', suspects and criminals.[152]

The Criminalisation of Irregular Movements

The management of the Syrian–Iraqi border by the French and British authorities, and later also by the Iraqi government, entailed the gradual prohibition and criminalisation of certain cross-border practices. Although visas were required almost from the beginning of the Mandate period, the implementation of the process making travellers without proper documents liable to sanctions occurred gradually. In this context, some people developed strategies to circumvent the legislation that now criminalised any movement that did not receive prior

[148] CADN, 1SL/1/V/1025, 'Relevé du répertoire des indésirables détenu au consulat d'Irak à Beyrouth' (1933), with notes from the *Sûreté Générale* of Syria and Lebanon.
[149] CADN, 1SL/1/V/843, Note by Périer (*Bureau Diplomatique* of the French High Commission), Beirut, 27 July 1936.
[150] CADC, 48CPCOM62, the *chargé de France* in Iraq to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Baghdad, 19 May 1935.
[151] CADN, 1SL/1/V/636, Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the French Legation in Iraq, Baghdad, 8 October 1938.
[152] CADN, 1SL/1/V/636, Jean Lescuyer (advisor, French Legation in Iraq) to the French High Commissioner, Baghdad, 8 October 1938; Note by *Cabinet Politique*, Beirut, 17 October 1938; the French High Commissioner to Jean Lescuyer, Beirut, 18 November 1938.

approval from the authorities. As will be seen, the border regime governing movements between Syria and Iraq took shape through a dynamic interplay between the tightening of controls and the criminalisation of certain movements, on the one hand, and the development of practices and strategies for circumventing border controls on the other hand.

Undocumented travellers

Entering Syrian–Lebanese territory without a passport and visa became punishable from 3 February 1927. Amending the 1924 regulation on passport formalities, Decree 760 provided for penalties ranging from a fine of five to fifty Syrian pounds to imprisonment for six days to six months for those who entered the French Mandate territories without proper documents.[153] As the Director of the *Sûreté Générale* pointed out, this law did not apply to people without documents presenting themselves at the border posts, who were simply turned back; it only applied to foreigners who had slipped through the borders clandestinely.[154] In the following years, infringements of Decree 760 occasionally appeared as an entry in the reports of the different brigades of the *Sûreté Générale*. Between the beginning of 1930 and the end of 1931, for example, the *Sûreté Générale* of Damascus, which managed the brigades of Homs, Hama, Deraa and Banat Yacoub, recorded between twelve and thirty-eight infractions during each three-month period. As for the *Sûreté Générale* of Aleppo, in 1931, its quarterly reports indicated that between twenty-six and forty-six people had entered Syria clandestinely during each quarter.[155] In most cases, people caught while crossing the border irregularly were brought before the court, imprisoned for some time and then deported. This was the case for Mansour Nassib, a native of the Hijaz, who was arrested by the *Sûreté Générale* of Abu Kemal after entering Syria clandestinely from Iraq in February 1932. The head officer at Abu Kemal conveyed a detailed description of him to the Director of the *Sûreté Générale* in Beirut, asking if he was allowed to deport him after he completed his sentence of six-days imprisonment.[156] Expulsion orders were signed by the High Commissioner or his representatives. At the time of their expulsion, deportees were given a *laissez-passer* by the *Sûreté Générale* to leave the country. However, the border authorities sometimes did not recognise the document and

[153] Decree No. 760, *Bulletin Mensuel des Actes Administratif du Haut-Commissariat*, 3 February 1927. https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6459806k/f9.item (accessed 23 May 2022).
[154] CADN, 1SL/1/V/442, the Director of the *Sûreté Générale* to the Director of the *Service des Renseignements*, Beirut, 26 July 1927.
[155] For the quarterly reports of the *Sûreté Générale* between late 1929 and 1931, see CADN, 1SL/1/V/842.
[156] CADN, 1SL/1/V/842, Delmas (head of the *Sûreté Générale* in the Euphrates territories) to the Director of the *Sûreté Générale*, Deir ez-Zor, 20 February 1932.

arrested the person a second time for lack of an identity document. The *Sûreté Générale* sought to clarify the issue in June 1936, as it caused a heavy financial burden on the state.[157]

A few years after the introduction of fines and prison sentences for undocumented travellers and migrants, in mid-1931, the French also decided to sanction those who helped such people to slip across the borders. The question was first raised by border officials working on the Lebanese–Palestinian border of Naqura. On 16 April 1931, the Director of the *Sûreté Générale* reported that a Palestinian driver, Younes Jaber Sa'dallah, had helped someone to cross the border clandestinely, pointing out that there was no law punishing those who facilitated such illegal crossings. In this context, he had had no other option than to ban the driver from the French mandated territories.[158] A month later, however, he emphasised the extent of clandestine movements, saying that the various officials in charge of the border posts throughout Lebanon and Syria were reporting that 'organisations [were] specialised in facilitating clandestine border crossing' for all those who had an interest in avoiding controls. He pointed to a loophole in the law: while Decree 760 of 3 February 1927 had criminalised illegal entry into Lebanon and Syria, no sanctions existed for those who facilitated clandestine crossings at land borders. Yet, since 1923, a penalty for those who facilitated the embarkation or disembarkation of stowaways had been provided for in a previously enacted decree.[159] The High Commissioner responded quickly to his request by amending an existing decree, which now stipulated that the same penalties would apply to those who promoted and facilitated illegal entry into or exit from the French mandated territories.[160]

Meanwhile, the early 1930s saw the development of tighter controls at border crossings, which were reflected in the number of people turned back at Syrian border posts (Table 5). Police authorities in Iraq and Syria issued instructions to border officials for stricter control of undocumented travellers passing through the various border posts. As we have seen, the principle of turning away people from the border posts who arrived without visas and passports was not always applied. Thus, in April 1930, the French and British authorities reaffirmed the need to deny access to the mandated territories to all irregulars. On the Syrian side, the French instructed officials in Abu Chamat to turn back any person coming from Iraq who arrived without having completed the necessary formalities. On the Iraqi side, the authorities took

[157] CADN, 1SL/1/V/28, Circular No. 332, the Directorate of the *Sûreté Générale*, Beirut, 26 June 1936.
[158] CADN, 1SL/1/V/842, the Director of the *Sûreté Générale* to the Political Affairs advisor at the French High Commission, Beirut, 16 April 1931.
[159] CADN, 1SL/1/V/442, Director of the *Sûreté Générale* to the Political Affairs advisor at the French High Commission, Beirut, 6 May 1931.
[160] CADN, 1SL/1/V/442, Decree 058/LR of 18 June 1931.

similar steps to ensure that all travellers from Syria whose passports did not bear a British visa would be 'ruthlessly turned back'.[161]

TABLE 5: NUMBER OF FOREIGNERS TURNED BACK AT SYRIAN BORDER POSTS[162]

	1st quarter 1928	2nd quarter 1928	1st quarter 1929	1st quarter 1930	2nd quarter 1930	3rd quarter 1930	1st quarter 1931	2nd quarter 1931	3rd quarter 1931
Sûreté Générale Aleppo	75	35	98	150	138	217	90	130	107
Sûreté Générale Damascus	50	36	102	59	92	76	80	116	72
Sûreté Générale Deir ez-Zor						9	6	8	6
Border post Abu-Kemal						21	1	1	1

The Syrian and Iraqi border authorities were also particularly concerned about people transiting through their territories. As the transdesert routes were key passageways linking regions far beyond Syria and Iraq, many people applied for transit visas to pass through these countries on their way to different final destinations. However, some of these travellers remained stuck in the territories that they were only supposed to pass through. This could happen when the border authorities of the neighbouring country refused entry to a traveller and turned them back to the country of transit. As early as 1925, High Commissioner Sarrail had pointed out that French consular agents often granted transit visas to destitute people who were then denied entry into Iraq or Palestine and thus remained as burdens to the French Mandate state. He had therefore recommended that French consulates grant visas only to travellers whose passports already bore the visa of the destination country.[163] These recommendations, however, had not been implemented in a systematic way and came up again in the early 1930s. More specifically, it was the clandestine movement of Jewish migrants to Palestine that led to the raising of the issue of transit visas.

'Jews in mail bags'? Immigration to Palestine

The movements of Jewish migrants to Palestine provide an avenue for a more detailed exploration of the mobility of undocumented travellers and migrants across the Syrian Desert,

[161] CADC, 50CPCOM544, E 420–1, French Consul Lépissier to the French High Commissioner, Baghdad, 4 April 1930 (and a second undated follow-up letter transmitting measures taken by the Iraqi government).
[162] CADN, 1SL/1/V/842, quarterly reports of the *Sûreté Générale* between 1928 and 1931.
[163] CADC, 50CPCOM310, High Commissioner Sarrail to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Beirut, 25 May 1925.

their strategies and the roles of intermediary actors who helped them to avoid border controls. As stated in the Mandate charter for Palestine, the British strongly encouraged Jewish immigration to Palestine during the First World War and during the immediate post-war period. However, beginning in the early 1920s, they imposed financial conditions on the granting of immigration certificates to Jewish migrants, making it more difficult for the less fortunate to obtain such a certificate. Subsequently, immigration policies in Mandate Palestine became even more restrictive, especially after the 1936 Revolt, at a time when the British sought to secure Arab support. Restrictions on the immigration of Jews to Palestine, as well as non-Jews, prompted clandestine movements of migrants into Palestine commencing from the 1930s.[164] Lauren Banko has highlighted the extent of this illegal immigration across the Syrian–Lebanese–Palestinian border, emphasising the role of smugglers and, above all, the capacity of mobile people to develop strategies to circumvent the border regime.[165] Clandestine movements across the 'tri-border region' between Lebanon, Syria and Palestine increased even more at the end of the French Mandate, and especially during World War Two.[166] Yet, Jewish migrants also travelled on the transdesert routes linking Iraq with Syria and Palestine in the 1930s.

Applying for a transit visa to Syria was a way for some Iraqi Jews to reach the border with Palestine (without having obtained a British Palestinian visa). In February 1932, the British authorities in Palestine turned back to Syria a group of Afghan and mainly Jewish Iraqi travellers who had transited through Syria and whom they considered undesirable. Faced with recriminations, the French consul in Iraq, Paul Lépissier, promised to carry out stricter surveillance of travellers requesting a transit visa.[167] As the Director of the Palestinian Department of Immigration pointed out to the British High Commissioner for Iraq in July 1932, would-be immigrants for Palestine did not apply for a British visa in Baghdad; they merely applied for a transit visa to Syria and then attempted to avoid border controls at the Palestinian border.[168] In order to prevent migrants from reaching Palestine via Syria without prior permission, in March 1933, French consular officials were instructed to grant transit visas only

[164] Lauren Banko, 'Refugees, Displaced Migrants, and Territorialization in Interwar Palestine', pp. 19–49; Dvora Hacohen, 'British Immigration Policy to Palestine in the 1930s: Implications for Youth Aliyah', *Middle Eastern Studies* 37:4 (2001), pp. 206–218; Henri Laurens, *La question de Palestine, Tome deuxième 1922–1947: Une mission sacrée de civilisation* (Paris: Fayard, 2002).
[165] Lauren Banko, 'Claiming Identities in Palestine', pp. 35–40.
[166] Asher Kaufman, *Contested Frontiers in the Syria-Lebanon-Israel Region* (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2014), pp. 81–83.
[167] CADC, 50CPCOM544, Paul Lépissier to the French High Commissioner for Syria, Baghdad, 27 February 1932.
[168] TNA, FO 684/6, the Department of Immigration to the Secretary of the High Commissioner for Iraq, Jerusalem, 23 July 1932.

upon receipt of a certificate from the Palestinian immigration authorities.[169] Meanwhile, the French High Commissioner issued instructions that his authorisation would henceforth be required to approve any transit visa application submitted to the Baghdad consulate by Jewish Iraqis. The Iraqi authorities and the British consulate in Iraq even expressed surprise at the 'strict control' exercised by the French over travellers who might be going to Palestine. It is evident that the main reason for these strict measures was that the French feared that these migrants would be turned back to Syria by the Palestinian border authorities. [170]

The issue of smugglers was also of growing concern to the Mandate authorities, who began to investigate possible organisations that were helping migrants to enter Palestine commencing from the early 1930s. In October 1932, the French confirmed to the Deputy Commandant of the Palestinian Criminal Investigation Department the presence of several 'agents' in Syria, including two Iraqi Jews involved in smuggling people between Iraq, Syria and Palestine.[171] In September 1934, the Transjordan Frontier Force[172] arrested a group of five Jewish Iraqis from Baghdad, who had been smuggled in from Syria, in the district of 'Ajlun in Transjordan. 'It has been revealed as a result of investigations', the report noted, 'that they came from Iraq to Damascus where they met Salim Jabr of Deraa and Jodat Sairdan of Damascus and agreed with them to do everything necessary to smuggle them to Jerusalem against a payment of 30 pounds.' The report also noted the arrest of two individuals accused of helping the five Iraqis as they travelled across Transjordan, pointing out that the smuggling 'business' was increasing.[173] Moreover, somewhat unexpectedly, Syria and the transdesert routes were also a passageway to Palestine in the reverse direction, namely for Jewish migrants arriving from the Mediterranean. Due to strict controls on the Palestinian coast, and on the border with Egypt, some migrants tried to enter Palestine through its north-eastern border by applying for a transit

[169] More generally, the question of transit visas was also the subject of new instructions issued by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs in January 1934, which required French consuls to grant transit visas for the French mandated territories only to those who could produce a consular visa from the neighbouring country to which they were travelling. CADC, 50CPCOM544, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs to French diplomatic agents, Paris, 29 January 1934.

[170] CADC, 48CPCOM87, Dumarçay (French consulate, Baghdad) to the delegate general of the High Commissioner, Baghdad, 10 October 1932; CADC, 50CPCOM544, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs to French diplomatic agents, Paris, 15 March 1933.

[171] TNA, FO 684/6, Inspector General of Police of Syria and Lebanon to Rice (Deputy Commandant, CID), Beirut, 7 October 1932.

[172] Established in April 1926, and surprisingly funded by the High Commission for Palestine, the Transjordan Frontier Force was a military force tasked with patrolling the borders of Transjordan and monitoring the tribes in this area. See Matthew Hughes, 'British Private Armies in the Middle East?', *The RUSI Journal* 153:2 (2008), pp. 70–75; Martin Thomas, *Empires of Intelligence: Security Services and Colonial Disorder after 1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), pp. 232–234.

[173] TNA, FO 684/7/34/29, report by Sudqi Qasim (Arab Legion, District Ajlun), 12 September 1934; Criminal Investigation Department, Palestine Police Force to Jerusalem to Mackereth (British consul, Damascus), Jerusalem, 19 September 1934.

visa via Syria to Iraq.[174] These people left Beirut and Damascus by car, headed towards Baghdad on the transdesert tracks before cutting across the desert to Transjordan and entering Palestine clandestinely via a poorly controlled part of the border. Consequently, in July 1934, the British consul in Damascus recommended that British consular agents exercise stricter control over visa applicants for Iraq and that French consular agents do the same with regard to transit visa applications for Iraq.[175]

Although restrictive immigration policies in Palestine may explain the rise of clandestine immigration between the two World Wars, the increasingly strained situation of Iraqi Jews during the 1930s may explain why some chose to leave Iraq. However, while the rise of Arab nationalism and the exacerbation of the Palestinian question undoubtedly affected the Jewish community in Iraq in the 1930s, most Iraqi Jewish intellectuals were determined to remain in their country. Moreover, Zionist propaganda did not have much influence in Iraq at that time. In fact, it was only after the massacres of 1941 (*farhud*), and especially in 1950–1951 that many Jewish Iraqis decided to leave.[176] Thus, the various cases that appear in French and British archives regarding Iraqi Jews who attempted to leave Iraq and enter Palestine clandestinely in the 1930s, sometimes with the help of smuggling organisations, are not representative of a larger movement. These circulations, as I understand them here, say more about the nature of the borders between Syria, Iraq, Transjordan and Palestine, than they do about Jewish immigration as such.

Migrant smuggling became a very sensitive issue in the mid-1930s, especially after some Arabic-language newspapers pointed to an allegedly large-scale smuggling operation. On 10 July 1934, the Palestine newspaper, *Al-Jami'a al-'Arabiyya*, published an article stating that the Iraqi press had reported the arrest by customs officers of the occupants of a car carrying mail for the Iraqi transport company owned by Haim Nathaniel, who were caught in the act of smuggling. 'Upon investigation', the article stated, 'it was discovered that 3 Jews were hidden in the mail bags with the object of entering Palestine illegally through Syria.'[177] The article went on to describe the Iraqi Jewish entrepreneur, Haim Nathaniel, and claimed that there had

[174] TNA, FO 684/7/34/29, report attached to a letter from the Criminal Investigation Department, Palestine Police Force to the British consul in Damascus, Jerusalem, 16 July 1934.
[175] TNA, FO 684/7/34/29, British Consul Mackereth to the Criminal Investigation Department, Damascus, 20 July 1934 as well as a report on 'Illegal Immigration', 20 July 1934.
[176] Aline Schlaefper, *Les intellectuels juifs de Bagdad*, pp. 99–116, 167–190; Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) [third edition], pp. 103, 119–122. See also Pierre-Jean Luizard, *La formation de l'Irak contemporain: Le rôle politique des ulémas chiites à la fin de la domination ottomane et au moment de la création de l'Etat irakien* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2002), p. 34.
[177] Quote: TNA, FO 684/7/34/29, English translation of part of the article published in *Al-Jami'a al-'Arabiyya*. For the original article, see 'Ḥawla tahrīb al-yahūd 'an ṭarīq al-'Irāq', *Al-Jami'a al-'Arabiyya*, 10 July 1934, p. 1. https://jrayed.org/en/newspapers/home (accessed 24 June 2022).

been a recent increase in the smuggling of migrants not only from Iraq but also from Iran, Afghanistan and elsewhere in Central Asia. According to the Palestinian newspaper, 'tens and hundreds of smuggled Jews' had crossed the Iraqi–Syrian border 'in mail bags'.[178] The Acting Director of Immigration in Palestine wrote to the consul in Damascus to enquire whether the Syrian authorities had confirmed the incident. Three weeks later, the French delegation in Damascus replied, informing the British consul that they could not provide him with any details, as the mail car had in fact been stopped on the Iraq–Transjordanian border and not on the Syrian–Iraqi border.[179] When questioned, the Transjordan authorities indicated that *Al-Jami'a al-'Arabiyya*'s claims were greatly exaggerated. They reported only two cases of attempted smuggling of clandestine migrants via the postal service provided by Haim Nathaniel's company. In both cases, the drivers had been prosecuted, convicted and deported from Transjordan. The Transjordanian authorities also believed that Haim Nathaniel had 'too much at stake to be a party to the smuggling of immigrants into Palestine'.[180]

At the time, Haim Nathaniel was indeed active in setting up a transport service between Baghdad and Haifa, as discussed in the previous chapter. He had been operating a regular postal service on this route since 1932 and was about to start a passenger service on 16 July 1934.[181] Although it cannot be ascertained from the sources whether Haim Nathaniel was aware of the two attempts to smuggle migrants in his convoys, it does appear that he took steps to prevent this from happening again. On 12 July 1934, the British consul in Baghdad informed the Chief Secretary to the Government of Palestine that Haim Nathaniel had proposed the introduction of a system to control the movements of goods and passengers on the Baghdad–Haifa route. All persons and goods carried in his cars would be recorded on a list (a 'manifest'), a copy of which could be handed over to the border officers upon entering Transjordan and Palestine. 'Haim requests that in the event of passengers being found in his convoys, whose names do not appear on the manifest', the consul explained, 'the fact may be reported to him, with the name of the driver responsible […].' This system was implemented in August 1934.[182]

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[178] Ibid.
[179] TNA, FO 684/7/34/29, the Acting Director of Immigration to the British consul in Damascus, Jerusalem, 13 July 1934; delegation of the French High Commission to Mackereth (British consul, Damascus), Damascus, 7 August 1934.
[180] TNA, FO 684/7/34/29, the Acting Director of Immigration to the British consul in Damascus, Jerusalem, 27 August 1934.
[181] TNA, FO 684/7/34/14, 'Baghdad to Haifa: The New Direct Service', *Iraq Times*, 31 July 1934; AUB, 'La nouvelle voie Caiffa-Bagdad', *Le Commerce du Levant*, 4 August 1934, p. 2.
[182] ISA, Grant of facilities to Haim Nathaniel Vol. 2, the British consul to Hathorn Hall (Chief Secretary, Government of Palestine), Baghdad, 12 September 1934. TNA, FO 684/7/34/29, the Acting Director of Immigration to the British consul in Damascus, Jerusalem, 27 August 1934.

In the years leading up to the Second World War, other similar cases on the Baghdad–Haifa route came to light. In February 1937, the Syrian newspaper *Les Échos* reported that a company carrying passengers between Iraq and Palestine was involved in 'human smuggling' and that a group of about 20 Iraqi Jews who had arrived in Haifa travelling this way had just been sentenced to prison. Commenting on the article, an employee of the British consulate in Damascus pointed out that he could refuse to issue visas to the drivers concerned if the Palestinian government would provide their names.[183] In November 1940, when the question of whether Haim Nathaniel was personally involved in the smuggling of Jewish migrants resurfaced, Nathaniel was cleared once again.[184] However, in 1941–1942, a sizeable number of Iraqi Jews left for Palestine with the help of smugglers. In March and April 1942, British consular officials and advisors in Iraq reported that an organization based in Baghdad and headed by a certain Ya'cub Zangari in Baghdad facilitated clandestine entry into Syria for Iraqi Jews heading for Palestine. For a sum of 60 Iraqi Dinars per person—which was considered 'a profitable racket' by the British consul in Mosul—would-be immigrants were transported by train to Mosul, continuing by car or on foot across the Syrian border before making their way by unknown means to Palestine. In April 1942, a few dozen people had managed to enter Syria in this way, some of whom also reached Palestine.[185] Secret army intelligence transmitted on 27 April 1942 from the Tenth Army in Iraq to the British Ambassador reported information 'obtained from a reliable Jewish source', according to which there were two categories of emigrants from Iraq. The first category comprised 'poor Jews who either ha[d] no money, or were looted' during the June 1941 riots (*farhud*), who paid truck drivers contacted in Rutbah, or even British soldiers, to help them cross the Palestinian border. The second category comprised 'rich Jews who ha[d] listened to bazaar rumours and [were] apprehensive about their future', preferring to leave Iraq before further riots occurred.[186]

The issue of undocumented travellers, and, more specifically, that of Jewish migrants to Palestine, highlights the dialectical relationship between the gradual tightening of the border regime and the constantly adapting practices of cross-border movements. The demand for transit visas proved to be a strategy for circumventing visa requirements and the establishment

[183] TNA, FO 684/10/37/441/29, Extract from *Les Échos* of 17 February 1937 with a handwritten note, British consulate, Damascus.
[184] TNA, FO 624/21/464, a telegram from the High Commissioner for Palestine to the British Ambassador in Iraq, Jerusalem, 7 November 1940 and a telegram from the British Ambassador to the High Commissioner for Palestine, 9 November 1940.
[185] TNA FO 624/29/374, reports by Political Advisor McNearnie, Kirkuk, 21 and 23 March 1942; British Embassy in Iraq to the Secretariat of the High Commissioner for Palestine, Bagdad, 7 April 1942.
[186] TNA FO 624/29/374, Headquarters of the Tenth Army to the British Embassy, Bagdad, 29 April 1942.

of interstate cooperation, both of which were measures designed to establish remote control. Moreover, the appearance of smugglers providing assistance to undocumented travellers and migrants, often in exchange for money, was also the result of a tightening of the border regime. In turn, the Mandate states chose to criminalise drivers and organisations that assisted people to cross borders illegally. The issue of criminalisation is once again taken up in the following section, which shows that the 1930s also witnessed a move towards making transport companies responsible—and even accountable—for controlling their passengers.

Transport Companies as 'Sheriff's deputies'

In April 1930, the Iraqi authorities informed the French that they would pass on the cost of turning back irregular passengers to the transport companies that had brought them to the border posts.[187] In a similar vein, in February 1932, the French consul in Baghdad stated that transport companies should, in his view, be required to guarantee that they would take all travellers 'whose case may be doubtful' back to Iraq at their own expense if they were turned away on arrival in Palestine.[188] These examples show that in the early 1930s, the proposal to involve transport companies in screening passengers before departure was a recurring one. It was later translated into the provision of an agreement on 'the refoulement of undesirables' signed in 1934 between the French and Iraqi police authorities. Before discussing the involvement of transporters, it is worth highlighting the practical difficulties and modalities of refoulement that led officials in Syria and Iraq to conclude this agreement.

Practical aspects of pushback

Throughout 1933, tensions arose between the French Mandate and Iraqi authorities over the refoulement of people arriving at the Syrian and Iraqi border posts without visas. In February of that year, the Secretary of the High Commissioner pointed out to the French *chargé d'affaires* in Baghdad, Paul Lépissier, that the Iraqi authorities had on several occasions turned back individuals arriving from Syria without papers and resources, who were neither Syrian nor Lebanese. He insisted on the need to reach an agreement on the modalities of refoulement to prevent the Iraqi authorities from continuing 'to clear the Iraqi territories of undesirables' without their being informed in advance of a person's refoulement to Syria.[189]

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[187] CADC, 50CPCOM544, E 420–1, French *chargé d'affaires* Lépissier to the French High Commissioner, Baghdad, April 1930.
[188] CADC, 50CPCOM544, Paul Lépissier to the French High Commissioner, Baghdad, 27 February 1932.
[189] CADN, 1SL/1/V/636, Helleu (General Secretary of the High Commissioner) to Paul Lépissier, Beirut, 25 February 1933.

An incident several months later was decisive. On 7 November 1933, the French border authorities in Abu Chamat arrested a man arriving by car from Iraq who presented himself without any papers. The man, named Mohammad Qassab, declared that he was from Mosul and had never previously left Iraq. As he could not prove his identity, the border agents sent him back to Iraq with the help of the Auto-Routière du Levant. Sometime later, however, the same man arrived again at Abu Chamat after the Iraqi authorities had turned him away as well, claiming that he was a Syrian national. Once again, Mohammad Qassab maintained that he was born in Mosul and later moved to Baghdad where he had been living for 11 years. Against this background, the French expelled him to Iraq a second time, before finally contacting the Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs to settle the matter definitively. Subsequently, Paul Lépissier stressed the importance of not having undocumented travellers turned back from post to post to the Iraqi Foreign Ministry, recalling that this issue was included in the draft agreement on the refoulement of undesirable travellers, to which the Iraqi government had not responded.[190]

In the months that followed, the French and Iraqi authorities exchanged views on the practicalities of turning back 'undesirable' and undocumented travellers and migrants. The latter proposed that the competent authorities should be allowed to turn back a Syrian/Lebanese national or a foreigner holding an identity document if this individual was deemed undesirable without obtaining the prior agreement of the other side. The French, for their part, recommended that mutual consent be maintained in all situations. They justified their view by pointing out the ease with which individuals could present a passport that did not belong to them, particularly given the frequent absence of photographs on such documents. They argued that lack of prior agreement would lead to numerous difficulties regarding the payment of transport costs in the event of a dispute over the identity of the returnee—a situation that was reminiscent of the case of Mohammad Qassab. Moreover, the French were reluctant to agree to the Iraqi proposal that the costs incurred for the refoulement of certain travellers would be borne by the state of which they were nationals.[191]

On 29 and 30 July 1934, the Director General of the Iraqi Police, Sabih Najib, and the Inspector General of the Police in the French mandated territories, Mr Bouchède, met in Baghdad to reconcile differences and draft an agreement to be submitted to the two governments. While stipulating that the costs should always be borne by the deporting states,

[190] CADC, 50CPCOM458, Paul Lépissier to the Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Baghdad, 21 December 1933.
[191] CADC, 50CPCOM458, the Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the French diplomatic agency, Baghdad, 20 January 1934; CADC, 50CPCOM459, Paul Lépissier to the Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Baghdad, 1 May 1934; CADN, 1SL/1/V/1025, Bouchède (Director, *Sûreté Générale*) to the advisor to the High Commissioner for External Relations, Beirut, 16 March 1934.

the agreement endorsed the Iraqi position on refoulement without prior agreement. Any 'undesirable' person found on Iraqi territory who was proven to be Syrian or Lebanese would automatically be deported to one of the Syrian border posts. The Iraqi authorities would then pass on the relevant information to the Director of the *Sûreté Générale* in Beirut, who would conduct an investigation to determine the exact identity of the person being deported from Iraq. If the investigation proved that the returnee was neither Syrian nor Lebanese, he would be sent back to Iraq by the first convoy. The same procedure would be applied in reverse. In other words, on this matter, the heads of the Iraqi and Syrian police largely maintained the previously prevailing situation, which had caused many difficulties in the case of Mohammad Qassab.[192]

Involving transport companies

Of particular interest is Article 3 of the proposed agreement, which concerned the refoulement of foreigners without visas at border posts. This is because it demonstrates the willingness of both police authorities to address the practical challenges posed by the porosity of the Syrian–Iraqi border and the remoteness of the border posts. The French minutes of the meeting highlighted the challenges caused by the particular infrastructure of border controls between Syria and Iraq.

> L'éloignement des postes frontières Syro-Irakiens, notamment entre Routbah et Abou Chamat soulève des difficultés réelles par le refoulement des étrangers qui se présentent avec des titres de voyage irréguliers, sans passeport, ou qui essayent de passer clandestinement, soit par leurs propres moyens soit avec la complicité de certain chauffeurs.[193]

To address these challenges, the French and Iraqi police authorities agreed on a series of measures to strengthen the control of travellers 'on departure from Iraq and Syria' and, above all, to hold transport companies accountable. Specifically, they agreed to the following terms:

> De rendre les chauffeurs et les compagnies de transports responsables des passagers clandestins dont ils devront assurer le retour sur leur point de depart. De porter à la connaissance des chauffeurs et compagnies de transports […] qu'ils seront signalés à

[192] CADN, 1SL/1/V/636, the Director of the *Sûreté Générale* to the General Secretary of the French High Commission, Beirut, 7 August 1934.
[193] CADN, 1SL/1/V/636, Minutes of the conference of 29–30 July 1934 attached to a letter from the Director of the *Sûreté Générale* to the General Secretary of the French High Commission, Beirut, 7 August 1934. See also CADC, 48CPCOM62, French *chargé d'affaires* in Iraq to the Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Baghdad, 19 May 1935. Translation: 'The distance between the Syrian–Iraqi border posts, particularly between Rutbah and Abu Chamat, raises real difficulties with the refoulement of foreigners who present themselves with irregular travel documents, without a passport, or who try to cross illegally either by their own means or with the complicity of certain drivers.'

> l'autorité de police de leur pays d'origine qui prendra à leur égard des sanctions très sévères en plus de l'obligation qui leur sera faite de rapatrier, à leurs frais, les dits passagers. [194]

With the establishment of these provisions, the French and Iraqi police authorities sought to shift the control of travellers upstream in order to avoid having to turn them back once they arrived at the border posts. In this way, the arrangement was intended to prevent logistical problems and financial disputes that could arise from the arrival of an undocumented individual at one of these border posts, as in the case of Mohammad Qassab. The underlying rationale was to 'pre-empt illegal entry' into their territory, as defined by Lauren Banko, who has demonstrated the deployment of the same reasoning in relation to the British border regime in Mandate Palestine.[195]

One way for the Mandate states to achieve remote control was through the 'forced co-option' of transport companies operating between Baghdad and Damascus.[196] This measure extended the move to criminalise smugglers, initiated in the French Mandate territories by the decree of 18 June 1931, which had sought to dissuade transport companies and drivers from acting as smugglers for undocumented travellers. But it was also intended to delegate some of the monitoring of cross-border mobility to private actors. Once again, the same strategy can be observed in many other contexts in the early twentieth century. In Britain, for example, some political leaders proposed in the 1900s that shipping companies should be forced to return indigent passengers to their ports of departure and to sort out desirable from undesirable travellers.[197] Around the same time, British officials in South Africa worked to persuade ship captains to act to prevent the boarding of unwanted travellers at home ports.[198] Compelled to check the identity documents of their passengers, and even to detect suspicious travellers, transport companies assumed the role of 'sheriff's deputies', thus relieving states of some of the costs and logistics of regulating cross-border mobility.[199] In the case of Mandate Syria and newly independent Iraq, the involvement of private actors in controlling cross-border mobility was also indicative of the limited capacity of post-Ottoman states to monitor their borders and control movements across particularly porous borders.

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[194] Ibid. Translation: 'To make drivers and transport companies responsible for stowaways whom they will have to take back to their point of departure. To inform drivers and transport companies [...] that they will be reported to the police authority of their home country, which will take very severe sanctions against them in addition to the obligation to repatriate, at their own expense, the passengers in question.'
[195] Lauren Banko, 'Keeping Out the "Undesirable Elements"', p. 1161.
[196] Quote: Virginie Guiraudon, 'Logiques et pratiques de l'Etat délégateur: les compagnies de transport dans le contrôle migratoire à distance. Partie 1', *Cultures & Conflits* No. 45 (2002), pp. 1–10.
[197] Alison Bashford and Catie Gilchrist, 'The Colonial History of the 1905 Aliens Act', pp. 421–423.
[198] Andrew MacDonald, 'Forging the Frontiers', p. 161.
[199] John Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport*, pp. 9–10. See also Virginie Guiraudon, 'Logiques et pratiques de l'Etat délégateur', p. 7.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated the co-constitutive relationship between the formation of the Syrian–Iraqi border and the development of transdesert mobility. Focusing primarily on the movements of people between Syria and Iraq, it has shown how the intensification and diversification of mobility across the Syrian Desert influenced the spatiality of border management as well as the practices and rules aimed at monitoring how travel between Syria and Iraq occurred and under what conditions. Conversely, the various sections of the chapter have shown that the formation of the Syrian–Iraqi border greatly affected the circulation of people and goods across the Syrian Desert and beyond. The chapter thus contributes to previous historical scholarship that has investigated the formation of territorial states and borders in the interwar Middle East from other standpoints, for example, the local dynamics of borderlands, the formation of migration regimes, the rise of nationalist movements and the making of citizenship. Its focus on the interplay between transdesert mobility and the formation of the Syrian–Iraqi border has enabled a study of the bordering process through three concomitant phenomena: the construction of a border infrastructure, the elaboration of instruments and techniques for controlling transdesert movements and the development of discourses of inclusion and exclusion that accompanied policies of promotion and restriction of cross-border mobility. By examining these three processes, the chapter has outlined a manifold bordering process, while advancing understanding of what the border meant for those who wished to cross it.

During the interwar period, cross-border movements were gradually subjected to regulations and controls, which conditioned the right to cross-border mobility and punctuated transdesert journeys. Passports and visas were the first instruments of the Mandate states for controlling cross-border movements, as these documents ensured that travellers could be identified and their motives approved by the consular authorities. The latter were crucial actors in monitoring cross-border movements, not only because they could refuse to grant visas to persons whose identities, status or motivations appeared suspicious but also because they kept intelligence officers and Mandate officials informed about travellers departing on the transdesert journey. The documentary regime that took shape in the 1920s thus contributed to the establishment of a form of ‘remote control’, which shifted part of the monitoring of cross-border mobility upstream, while obliging travellers to plan their journeys in advance. In addition, the legislative framework for cross-border mobility moved towards increasing criminalisation of irregular movements, firstly by making it illegal—and therefore

punishable—to cross the border without proper passports and visas, secondly by criminalising drivers and others who assisted clandestine travellers and migrants, and lastly by making transport companies responsible for the irregular travellers they served, thereby forcing them to police their passengers. Nevertheless, the elaboration and implementation of regulations and controls by the Mandate states followed a gradual and uncertain process during the interwar period; one that was characterised by considerable trial and error, frequent discrepancies between the instructions issued by the central authorities and the actual practices on the ground and constant adjustments. Moreover, the criminalisation of certain practices and the tightening of border controls did not prevent the movement of irregular travellers and migrants across the border between Iraq and Syria.

Although the Syrian–Iraqi border was not definitively delineated until 1932, with its actual demarcation only completed in the mid-1930s, practical controls on cross-border movements were inscribed at particular sites: in the embassies responsible for carrying out an initial screening of travellers applying for visas, at the multiple border posts established along the transdesert routes and, later, at the offices of the transport companies themselves. Initially, the border posts were located on the outskirts of the towns (i.e. at the edge of the desert). As they were easily circumvented by travellers, the Mandate authorities moved them further upstream (i.e. closer to the border line) at a later stage. The border posts nevertheless remained a few hundred kilometres from the provisional border line, given the indeterminate nature of the border and the desert environment of the border zone. Although discontinuous and fragmented, the border infrastructure enabled the authorities to exercise some control over transdesert traffic, which was naturally channelled along the main routes outside of which crossing the desert was difficult. Nonetheless, the Syrian–Iraqi border remained deeply permeable to the movements of irregular travellers, many of whom managed to bypass the checkpoints with the help of Bedouin guides, drivers and smuggling organisations. The image of well-monitored corridors and a porous border conveyed in the chapter title refers to the distinctly patchy management of the border by the Syrian and Iraqi administrations. However, it reflects not only the incapacity of the post-Ottoman states to ensure full control over the borderlands but also their desire to promote transdesert mobility and to keep the border open even in times of crisis, as illustrated by the cholera epidemic of 1927. For several months, the French and British authorities collaborated to prevent the spread of the epidemic westwards through transdesert traffic, while at the same time maintaining the flow of traffic. Although the French exercised stricter control over cross-border traffic, devoting considerable efforts to

controlling a larger area of the borderlands and channelling mobility onto a single route, they did everything in their power to prevent the complete closure of the border.

The gradual formation of a border institution led to the emergence of multiple mobility regimes that posed 'differential barriers to movement' between Syria and Iraq.[200] Although the Mandate states and post-independence Iraq strongly encouraged transdesert mobility for economic and political purposes, this was done in a very selective manner. State authorities kept a close eye on people whom they considered to pose a political, economic or moral threat and even sought to restrict their movements by denying them visas or turning them back at border posts. The regulation and monitoring of cross-border movements was based on the categorisation of potential travellers according to their actual or presumed nationality, socio-economic class, rank, sex and occupational and health status. The norms and fears that underpinned these categories stemmed from colonial racial considerations, imperial concerns about national prestige and the propensity of modern states to keep any potentially dangerous individuals out of their territories. Quite frequently, consular and border officials screened migrants and travellers according to their subjective perceptions and suspicions.

Similarly, the vague and all-encompassing category of 'undesirables' left the authorities free to consider any unwanted traveller as such, be it an undocumented migrant, a wanted criminal, a prostitute or a political activist. All in all, it appears that although the Mandate authorities endeavoured to standardise and homogenise the rules and practices of control across the various border posts and embassies, they also maintained a degree of ambiguity that allowed for discretionary treatment of persons on the move. This overview has shown that the process of bordering cannot be understood merely as a gradual strengthening of border controls with the aim of protecting state territories against clandestine flows; it must also be conceived as the process that produced these movements.[201]

[200] Nina Glick Schiller and Noel B. Salazar, 'Regimes of Mobility across the Globe', p. 187.
[201] Willem van Schendel, 'Spaces of Engagement: How Borderlands, Illegal Flows, and Territorial States Interlock', in Willem Van Schendel and Itty Abraham (eds.), *Illicit Flows and Criminal Things: States, Borders, and the Other Side of Globalization* (Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005), p. 59.

Chapter 5 – Global Crossroads

Introduction

In many ways, the transdesert route between Iraq and Syria served as a transit route. For numerous passengers as well as for the majority of the goods transported between Baghdad and Damascus, and vice versa, the trip across the Syrian Desert was just one leg of a much longer journey between cities and regions that were remote from Syria and Iraq. Moreover, in the case of mail, the time saved in routing letters and parcels sent between Europe and Central/South Asia via the transdesert route encouraged European postal administrations to divert their mail from the Red Sea route.[1] This chapter takes a global perspective on the Baghdad–Damascus route by examining more closely the movements and connections it produced beyond the states of Iraq and Syria and by considering its development within the structuring context of globalisation.[2] Specifically, it investigates how the transport system that developed along this route benefited transregional forms of mobility and altered their routes, and, in turn, how long-distance movements reshaped the transport system. More broadly, an exploration of how the Baghdad–Damascus route became a passageway for transregional mobilities offers another perspective on the transformations of the post-Ottoman Middle East during the interwar period, showing that while spaces were being reconfigured into distinct national territories, the Syrian Desert too was emerging as a space of intense circulation within an increasingly globalised world.

The second half of the nineteenth century witnessed an accelerating process of globalisation, during which the world became significantly more connected. This process entailed an intensification of the movements of people, goods, information and diseases, but also the diversification of these movements, which shaped interactions between 'a far wider range of persons and places'.[3] This globalising process went hand in hand with the dynamics

[1] CADC, 48CPCOM42, High Commissioner Weygand to the French Foreign Minister, Beirut, 16 April 1924; Convention between Pain (the postal administration, Syria) and Kettaneh, place unknown, 13 February 1925; LON, R28/1/4284/51764, French Report to the League of Nations for 1926; NARA, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Asia, 1910-1929, microfilm roll 16, File 890d.71/1, U.S. Consul Knabenshue to the Secretary of State, Beirut, 28 May 1924; Le Temps Archives, 'Confédération', *Gazette de Lausanne*, 2 March 1929, p. 2.
https://www.letempsarchives.ch/page/GDL_1929_03_02/2 (accessed 10 December 2021).
[2] Sebastian Conrad, *What is Global History?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), pp. 62–89.
[3] Quote: Nile Green, *Terrains of Exchange: Religious Economies of Global Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 21. See also James L. Gelvin and Nile Green (eds.), *Global Muslims in the Age of Steam and Print*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014); David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into*

of deceleration and restrictions on mobility, as outlined in the previous chapters, prompting reactions reflected in the phenomenon of 're-territorialisation' and the reaffirmation of local or national identities.[4] In the Middle East, too, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw cities and regions becoming increasingly connected to each other and to the rest of the world.[5] Whereas some historians have viewed the First World War as a kind of break in this process, others have highlighted 'continuities of globalization' throughout the period extending from 1880 to 1940.[6]

During this period, there was a marked increase in connections forged between the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean and Central Asia; three large regional spaces considered to be overlapping yet distinct within historical scholarship. In *Modernity and Culture: From the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean*, which was published in 2002, the editors, Leila T. Fawaz and Christopher A. Bayly, noted that scant attention had been paid to the 'interregional linkages' between the two regions of the Mediterranean/Middle East and the Indian Ocean/South Asia, which were still primarily studied within two separate historiographies. The various contributions of this edited volume sought to address this gap by reflecting on the links and boundaries between these regions from the seventeenth century to the early twentieth century. For both editors, the volume underlined connections but also reaffirmed the relevance of area studies focusing on each of these two regions.[7] For his part, Nile Green has proposed the conceptualisation of 'arenas', understood as 'dynamic and mutable spaces of interaction

the Origins of Cultural Change (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), pp. 260–283; Emily S. Rosenberg, *A World Connecting, 1870–1945* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2012).

[4] On the phenomena of 'de-territorialisation' and 're-territorialisation' associated with globalisation, see Cyrus Schayegh, who builds on the work of Christopher A. Bayly: Cyrus Schayegh, *The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), p. 48 (footnote no. 48).

[5] Simon Jackson, 'Introduction: The Global Middle East in the Age of Speed From Joyriding to Jamming, and from Racing to Raiding', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 39:1 (2019), pp. 111–115; Liat Kozma, Cyrus Schayegh and Avner Wishnitzer (eds.), *A Global Middle East: Mobility, Materiality and Culture in the Modern Age, 1880-1940* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014); Liat Kozma, *Global Women, Colonial Ports: Prostitution in the Interwar Middle East* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017); Graham Auman Pitts, 'Fallow Fields: Famine and the Making of Lebanon' (PhD thesis, Georgetown University, 2016). Some historians have emphasised the global connections woven through the Middle Eastern diasporas; see, for instance, Reem Bailony, 'Transnationalism and the Syrian Migrant Community: The Case of the 1925 Syrian Revolt', *Mashriq & Mahjar* 1:1 (2013), pp. 8–29.

[6] Liat Kozma, Cyrus Schayegh and Avner Wishnitzer (eds.), *A Global Middle East*, p. 5. The idea that the First World War was a turning point followed by a process of 'de-globalisation' originates mainly from economic historians who have worked on international trade; see, for example, Roger Owen and Şevket Pamuk, *A History of Middle East Economies in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 6–7. Nonetheless, this point has been taken up by other historians concerned with the impact of borders on connectivity; see, for example, Jordi Tejel and Ramazan Hakkı Öztan (eds), *Regimes of Mobility: Borders and State Formation in the Middle East, 1918-1946* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), p. 1.

[7] Leila T. Fawaz and Christopher A. Bayly (eds.), *Modernity and Culture: From the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), pp. 1–27. On the connections between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean, see also Jeremy Prestholdt, 'From Zanzibar to Beirut: Sayyida Salme bint Said and the Tensions of Cosmopolitanism', in James Gelvin and Nile Green (eds.), *Global Muslims*, pp. 204–226.

that enable patterns of dissemination, circulation, or competition'.[8] To replace the overly vague concept of the 'Middle East', he introduces a triadic constellation: a Mediterranean arena, an Inner Asian arena and an Indian Ocean arena. Although his notion of 'arena' does not differ significantly from conceptions of social space and region arising from the 'spatial turn',[9] his model has the merit of emphasising the plurality of space and the overlapping of arenas, while considering their evolution in the long run. In his conception, Iraq stood at a crossroads:

> […] the Iraqi interior interacted more with the Inner Asian arena, whereas southern Iraq interacted more with the Indian Ocean arena. At the intersection of several arenas—including the Mediterranean in certain periods—Iraq has been formed, and fragmented, by its very density of overlapping networks.[10]

In another article, Nile Green has specifically addressed the interlocking of Iraq with the Mediterranean arena by focusing on the journey undertaken in 1925 by a young Iranian, 'Abdullah Bahrami, from Tehran to New York. To make this trip, Bahrami fully availed of the developments in motorised transport across Iran and the Syrian Desert, which drastically reduced the journey time from the Iranian capital to the Mediterranean and on to the United States. Through a detailed examination of Bahrami's travelogue, Nile Green illustrates the growth of transregional connections resulting from transdesert transportation but also 'the limitations and tenuousness of global exchange'.[11] This chapter further explores how the development of the Baghdad–Damascus route strengthened linkages between the above-mentioned regional spaces. In particular, it examines how the transregional movements of hajj pilgrims and tourists facilitated further integration of Iraq into the Mediterranean arena and Syria into the Inner Asian/Indian Ocean arenas during the interwar years.

As Cátia Antunes and Karwan Fatah-Black have observed, global connections are 'invariably tied together in "nodes", which can be particular individuals, institutions or trading

[8] Nile Green, 'Rethinking the "Middle East" after the Oceanic Turn', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 34:3 (2014), pp. 556–564, here: p. 558.
[9] The entire literature on the 'spatial turn' from the 1990s onwards has considered space as a social product. See, for instance, Doreen B. Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage, 2005); Mimi Sheller, 'From Spatial Turn to Mobilities Turn', *Current Sociology* 65:4 (2017), p. 624. See also the next chapter for more on this issue.
[10] Nile Green, 'Rethinking the "Middle East" after the Oceanic Turn', p. 560.
[11] Nile Green, 'Fordist Connections: The Automotive Integration of the United States and Iran', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 58:2 (2016), p. 292. In following this person, Nile Green's approach was very much in line with the microhistorical approach promoted by John-Paul Ghobrial, who argues that '[microhistory] enables us to challenge simplistic ideas about the ease of mobility in the past, making it possible to see it as a process that had its own agents, opponents and beneficiaries.' See John-Paul A. Ghobrial, 'Moving Stories and What They Tell Us: Early Modern Mobility Between Microhistory and Global History', *Past & Present* No. 242, Suppl. 14 (2019), p. 246.

networks'.[12] The transport system that developed along the Baghdad–Damascus route was one of these nodes. As a global crossroads, it is a privileged site for examining the interactions between the local and the global and for reassessing the narrative of global integration by exposing developments that did not seem to follow predictable patterns. In particular, a focus on the Baghdad–Damascus route calls into question the linearity of the process of global integration and foregrounds the role and agency of local actors.[13] As an extensive body of literature has shown, globalisation cannot be conceived as a coherent and linear process. Many studies have highlighted spatially differentiated processes of global integration, showing that some places have become highly globalised while others have remained isolated.[14] Some historians have even concluded that the process of globalisation entails a dynamics of fragmentation as much as one of integration.[15] Others have shown that this process has been marked by moments of ebb and flow over time.[16] In other words, globalisation has been marked by 'interruptions, reversals, and processes of de-globalization', which historical research must take into account for the development of a comprehensive yet fine-grained understanding of the process up to the present day.[17] This chapter builds on these studies of how globalisation has unfolded around the globe and in the Middle East in particular.[18]

The chapter focuses, concretely, on two forms of transregional mobility that made the Baghdad–Damascus route into a global crossroads. The first is the movement of European travellers and tourists to Iraq and further east, and the second is the movement of Iraqi, Iranian, Afghan and Indian Muslim pilgrims to and from Mecca. As we shall see, the motivations and

[12] Cátia Antunes and Karwan Fatah-Black, *Explorations in History and Globalization* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. xvii.
[13] See the historical literature on 'global microhistory' and the study of 'global localities' in particular: Claudia Baumann, Antje Dietze and Megan Maruschke, 'Portals of Globalization – An Introduction', *Comparativ* 27:3–4 (2017), pp. 7–20; Romain Bertrand and Guillaume Calafat, 'La microhistoire globale: affaire(s) à suivre', *Annales HSS* 73:1 (2018), pp. 3–18; Sebastian Conrad, *What is Global History?*, pp. 129–132; Christian G. De Vito, 'History without Scale: The Micro-Spatial Perspective', *Past & Present* No. 242, Suppl. 14 (2019), pp. 348–372; Richard Drayton and David Motadel, 'Discussion: The Futures of Global History', *Journal of Global History* 13:1 (2018), pp. 1–21; John-Paul A. Ghobrial, 'Introduction: Seeing the World like a Microhistorian', *Past & Present* No. 242, Suppl. 14 (2019), pp. 1–22.
[14] Emily S. Rosenberg, *A World Connecting, 1870–1945*, p. 7; Jean-Paul Zuniga, 'L'Histoire impériale à l'heure de l'"histoire globale"', *Revue d'histoire moderne contemporaine* 544:5 (2007), p. 60.
[15] See the literature reviewed in Matthias Middell and Katja Naumann, 'Global History and the Spatial Turn: From the Impact of Area Studies to the Study of Critical Junctures of Globalization', *Journal of Global History* 5:1 (2010), p. 153.
[16] Caroline Douki and Philippe Minard, 'Histoire globale, histoires connectées: un changement d'échelle historiographique ?', *Revue d'histoire moderne contemporaine*, 54:4–5 (2007), p. 11.
[17] Richard Drayton and David Motadel, 'Discussion: The Futures of Global History', p. 9.
[18] For critiques of the linear view of global integration in Middle Eastern historiography, see On Barak, *On Time: Technology and Temporality in Modern Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Valeska Huber, *Channelling Mobilities: Migration and Globalisation in the Suez Canal Region and Beyond, 1869-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Mikiya Koyagi, *Iran in Motion: Mobility, Space, and the Trans-Iranian Railway* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021), here: pp. 11–12.

practices of these travellers were neither homogeneous nor clear; rather, they differed from one individual to another, varying along a continuum that ranged from pilgrimage to tourism.[19] The interwar years were marked on one side by the promotion and establishment of Iraq as a tourist destination for Europeans through the initiatives of transport entrepreneurs, tourism agencies, Mandate authorities and local governments but also through the influence of the travellers themselves. On the other side, new overland pilgrimage routes emerged during this period, which made Iraq and Syria into a passageway for many pilgrims travelling each year to the holy cities of Medina and Mecca, while also visiting various shrines in Iran, Iraq, Syria and Palestine.

Zooming out, the chapter further explores how the transport system underpinning the Baghdad–Damascus route became interwoven with other transport networks. While the automobile evidently competed with other modes of transport along certain sections, this chapter interrogates the interconnectivity of modes of travel by car, train and ship on a transregional scale. Were the operations of the motor transport services between Baghdad, Damascus and Beirut closely connected with the railway and maritime networks that terminated in these three cities? The chapter investigates the conditions required for the interdependence of these networks and the efforts made by the contractors to coordinate their operations.

Finally, the chapter investigates the influence of the long-distance movements of tourists and pilgrims on the transport system and transdesert connectivity. Conversely, it explores how the specificities of the transport sector and conditions of travel across the desert impacted tourists and pilgrims. The chapter traces the emergence, in the 1930s, of other transregional routes, which bypassed the Syrian Desert and either complemented or competed with the Baghdad–Damascus route for the circulation of mail, tourists and pilgrims. It explores the very slow-paced development of a transcontinental rail route between Europe and Iraq as well as plans to develop new pilgrimage routes between Baghdad/Damascus and Medina. The partial re-routing of the long-distance mobility of tourists, pilgrims and travellers along these routes reveals that the integration of the Baghdad–Damascus route into transregional networks was an uneven process. It entailed reversals and disconnections, which as will be shown, could have serious consequences for local actors.

[19] Valene L. Smith, 'Introduction: The Quest in Guest', *Annals of Tourism Research* 19:1 (1992), p. 3. See also Doron Bar and Kobi Cohen-Hattab, 'A New Kind of Pilgrimage: The Modern Tourist Pilgrim of Nineteenth Century and Early Twentieth Century Palestine', *Middle Eastern Studies* 39:2 (2003), pp. 131–148.

At the Crossroads

Putting Iraq on the tourist map

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the expansion of European tourism, driven by advances in transportation (rail and steam travel), the increasing circulation of guidebooks and photographs, the establishment of hotels that met 'European standards' and the development of tourism agencies was clearly evident along the southern and eastern Mediterranean shores. Founded in the early nineteenth century, the British tourism agency, Thomas Cook & Son, played a key role in this expansion process by providing comfortable organised tours beyond the Mediterranean and inspiring Europeans to go on them. Since the late 1860s, the company had advertised all-inclusive tours to Egypt, Ottoman Palestine and Syria, as well as the Maghreb, where a network of facilities and agents, entirely controlled by the company, was established. The burgeoning tourism industry in these regions prompted a shift towards what was to become mass tourism commencing from the second half of the twentieth century.[20] Whereas the Eastern Mediterranean became increasingly attractive to Europeans in the second half of the nineteenth century, the distant Ottoman provinces in Mesopotamia remained outside these tourist circuits. As Farouk Daher has pointed out, '[a] typical journey from Europe covered Egypt's ancient monuments, the Nile, the holy sites in Palestine and prime locations in major cities such as Beirut, Jerusalem, and Damascus.'[21] Although some guidebooks mentioned the caravan routes crossing the Syrian Desert, Mesopotamia largely remained 'a remote and unwelcoming locale' in the minds of European travellers until the First World War.[22] Following the British–Indian occupation of Basra,

[20] Piers Brendon, *Thomas Cook: 150 Years of Popular Tourism* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1991); Xavier Guillot, 'From One Globalization to Another: In Search of the Seeds of Modern Tourism in the Levant, a Western Perspective', in Rami Farouk Daher (ed.), *Tourism in the Middle East: Continuity, Change and Transformation* (Clevedon: Channel View Publications, 2007), pp. 95–110; Waleed Hazbun, 'The East as an Exhibit: Thomas Cook & Son and the Origins of the International Tourism Industry in Egypt', in Philip Scranton and Janet F. Davidson (eds.), *The Business of Tourism: Place, Faith, and History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), pp. 3–33; F. Robert Hunter, 'Tourism and Empire: The Thomas Cook & Son Enterprise on the Nile, 1868–1914', *Middle Eastern Studies* 40:5 (2004), pp. 28–54; Stephen L. Keck, ''Going Out and Doing Something': Victorian Tourists in Egypt and the "Tourist Ethic"', *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change* 8:4 (2010), pp. 293–304; Noha Nasser, 'A Historiography of Tourism in Cairo: A Spatial Perspective', in Rami Farouk Daher (ed.), *Tourism in the Middle East*, pp. 70–94. For tourist guides, see F. Robert Hunter, 'Promoting Empire: The Hachette Tourist in French Morocco, 1919–36', *Middle Eastern Studies* 43:4 (1997), pp. 579–591.

[21] Rami Farouk Daher, 'Reconceptualizing Tourism in the Middle East: Place, Heritage, Mobility and Competitiveness', in Rami Farouk Daher (ed.), *Tourism in the Middle East*, p. 5. See also Billie Melman, *Empires of Antiquities: Modernity and the Rediscovery of the Ancient Near East, 1914-1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 188.

[22] Frederick N. Bohrer, 'Inventing Assyria: Exoticism and Reception in Nineteenth-Century England and France', *The Art Bulletin* 80:2 (1998), p. 337. For examples of guidebooks including Mesopotamia, see John Murray, *Handbook for Travellers in Turkey in Asia, with General Hints for Travellers in Turkey* (London: Murray, 1872); John Murray, *Handbook for Travellers in Asia Minor, Transcaucasus, Persia, etc*. (London: Murray, 1895).

Baghdad and Mosul during the First World War, British soldiers began to discover Mesopotamia and developed an interest in visiting the region. With transdesert transport from Syria gaining ground, the 1920s saw increasing numbers of European visitors to Iraq.[23]

Thomas Cook & Son quickly seized the opportunity to expand its operations beyond the desert. Prior to the First World War, the company's brochures and leaflets only rarely offered tours that included Baghdad.[24] However, when the first experiments with motorised transport proved successful, the company rapidly established wider circuits, including in Iraq. In early May 1923, an agent of the company travelled from Damascus to Baghdad via Palmyra to report on travel conditions along the new route. The company was planning to open a rest house to offer tourists better accommodation on the way.[25] In December 1923, two articles published in Thomas Cook's magazine, *The Traveller's Gazette*, described the establishment of regular transport services between Beirut and Baghdad. One claimed that the development of transport through the Syrian Desert and Iraq, together with the availability of adequate accommodation, had transformed Iraq into 'a land made fit for tourists'.[26] The British company set about developing tours to Mesopotamia along similar lines to those that it had been running in Egypt, Ottoman Syria and Palestine for several decades. By 1924, *The Traveller's Gazette* highlighted 'the remarkable development of Mesopotamia as a "tour-able" land since the advent of the British Mandate' and advertised all-inclusive 'escorted' and 'popular' first- or second-class tour packages, which included transport, hotels, luggage transfers and visits. [27]

To expand its activities in Iraq, Thomas Cook & Son sought to develop a partnership with a transport company operating across the Syrian Desert. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Francis and Alfred Kettaneh, the managers of the Eastern Transport Company, had relatives who ran branches of Thomas Cook & Son in Jerusalem and Beirut. These family connections raised concerns among British officials who did not want the Kettaneh brothers to enjoy a privileged relationship with the British tourism agency.[28] However, these contacts did not serve

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23 For wartime travel practices in Mesopotamia, see Nadia Atia, 'A Wartime Tourist Trail: Mesopotamia in the British Imagination, 1914–1918', *Studies in Travel Writing* 16:4 (2012), pp. 403–414; Priya Satia, '"A Rebellion of Technology". Development, Policing, and the British Arabian Imaginary', in Diana K. Davis (ed.), *Environmental Imaginaries of the Middle East and North Africa* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2011), pp. 23–59. For the accounts of some British travellers to Iraq from the First World War onwards, see James Canton, *From Cairo to Baghdad: British Travellers in Arabia* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), pp. 129–154.

[24] For an example, see TCA, 'Camping Tours in Palestine, Syria, Sinai, Petra, Mesopotamia, etc.', 1908.

[25] TNA, FO 371/9013, British Consul Palmer to the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Damascus, 4 May 1923.

[26] TCA, 'By Automobile from Beyrout to Baghdad' and 'A Land Made Fit for Tourists: The Remarkable Development of Mesopotamia', *The Traveller's Gazette* No. 12 (December 1923), pp. 10–11.

[27] TCA, 'The Land between the Two Rivers', *The Traveller's Gazette* No. 10 (October 1924), pp. 14, 26–27.

[28] TNA, FO 684/1/24/14, British Consul Smart to the Foreign Office, Beirut, 2 January 1924. As a brochure of the Nairn Transport Company indicated, the overseas offices of Thomas Cook & Son located in London, New York,

the Eastern Transport Company. In January 1924, Thomas Cook's head office in London protested against the inclusion of its name in a brochure of the Eastern Transport Company and refused to collaborate with the Kettaneh brothers, citing inferior travelling conditions on the Palmyra route.[29] Their refusal to book tickets with the Eastern Transport Company was detrimental to the company, as it relied heavily on passenger bookings made from London.[30] In the following years, Thomas Cook & Son gave preference to the Nairn Transport Company and their relationship intensified in the 1930s. As early as 1932, the Haifa branch of Thomas Cook & Son was Nairn's main booking agency for the stretch of the journey between Haifa, Damascus and Baghdad. In June 1938, the agent acknowledged that their arrangements with the Nairn Transport Company had generated many benefits for the British company.

> I have never admitted to Nairn that the existing arrangement is of any great importance, but it is a fact that we earned £P.1,308,023 [*sic*] from December 1932 to May 1938, excluding the additional Nairn traffic which has been secured by this Office as a result of our acting as Official Nairn Agents in Haifa.[31]

Likewise, cooperation with Thomas Cook & Son was most beneficial for the Nairn Transport Company.

These private companies also helped to brand Iraq as a tourist destination and to market certain sites.[32] The promotion of tourism in Iraq capitalised on the remains of ancient civilisations, uncovered by numerous archaeological missions at the beginning of the twentieth century and increasingly publicised.[33] An article with the sub-headline, 'The Thrill of Antiquity', published in *The Traveller's Gazette* in January 1927, stressed the value of visiting 'the ancient cities of Iraq', referring to a newly published book by Dorothy Mackay on the

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Paris, Marseille, Bombay and Baghdad acted as their booking agents; see TCA, Volume-Road 3, 'The Overland Desert Mail: The Direct Road to the East', *The Nairn Transport Company* [no date], p. 15.

[29] Another important reason was the pressure placed on them by the Department of Overseas Trade to support the Nairn Transport Company. TNA, FO 684/1/24/14, Huskisson (Thomas Cook & Son) to the Department of Overseas Trade, London, 10 January 1924; Memorandum sent by the Department of Overseas Trade, 1 February 1924.

[30] TNA, FO 684/1/24/14, British Consul Smart to the Foreign Office, Damascus, 20 May 1924.

[31] TCA, Black Box 32, Memorandum sent by an agent of Thomas Cook & Son in Haifa, 19 June 1938. See also TCA, Black Box 32, an agent of Thomas Cook & Son in Haifa, 17 February 1936 as well as the agreement made between the Nairn Transport Company and Thomas Cook & Son (acting on behalf of themselves and the *Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits*), 30 September 1935.

[32] On the role of guidebooks in marketing certain sites in the French colonies during the interwar period, see Ellen Furlough, 'Une leçon des choses: Tourism, Empire, and the Nation in Interwar France', *French Historical Studies* 25:3 (2002), pp. 450–457.

[33] Magnus T. Bernhardsson, *Reclaiming a Plundered Past: Archaeology and Nation Building in Modern Iraq* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), pp. 34–35, 57–92; Idir Ouahes, S*yria and Lebanon under the French Mandate: Cultural Imperialism and the Workings of Empire* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018), pp. 37–64; Billie Melman, *Empires of Antiquities: Modernity and the Rediscovery of the Ancient Near East, 1914-1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 159–215.

excavations of the Oxford and Field Museums Expedition in Iraq.[34] The booklet produced by Thomas Cook & Son recommended visiting the monuments of Baghdad from the Abbasid period as well as the 'buried cities' of Babylon, Nineveh, Kish and Ur, and the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala.[35] Likewise, the promotional materials of the Eastern Transport Company contributed to Iraq's emergence as a tourist destination. In a brochure titled 'The Call of the East', the company advertised its tourist package, which commenced with a visit to the ruins of Palmyra, before proceeding to historical and archaeological sites in Iraq, such as Ctesiphon and the mosque of Kadhimain.[36] The publications produced by the Nairn Transport Company were similar.[37] Around the same time, the Iraqi government also published *Maps of Iraq with Notes for Visitors*, which advised travellers to visit the same sites.[38]

While emphasising the heritage of biblical times and ancient civilisations, these promotional publications conjured up fantasies inspired by *The Arabian Nights*. Thomas Cook's *Tours to Mesopotamia* claimed that 'all the glamour of the city of Haroun-el-Rashid and the Arabian Nights, all the colour and romance of the romantic East [were] now within a ten day's journey of London'.[39] Undoubtedly, these brochures were intended for a European and American travelling public imbued with orientalist imaginings. Drawing on Edward Said's *Orientalism*, Rami F. Daher has shown that the literary, political and scientific discourse produced on the 'Levant' since the eighteenth century created 'a specific *Orient* in the minds of Europeans', which had a major influence on tourism. European travellers crossing the Mediterranean believed they were entering 'a cultural landscape that had not changed since antiquity, or since ancient Biblical and Byzantine times'.[40] Similarly, Mesopotamia offered Europeans who were craving romanticism 'an escape from Western science'.[41] Filled with these imaginings, European travellers who arrived in the Eastern Mediterranean in the nineteenth

[34] TCA, 'The Ancient Cites of Iraq: The Thrill of Antiquity', *The Traveller's Gazette* 77:1 (January 1927), p. 4.
[35] TCA, Thomas Cook & Son, *Tours to Mesopotamia (Iraq)*, season 1927–1928.
[36] NARA, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Asia, 1910–1929, microfilm roll 16, File 890d.79790g/1, 'The Call of the East' and 'Travel! Where and Why', circulars of the Eastern Transport Company/BBTA attached to a letter from the U.S consul to the U.S. Department of State, Baghdad, 16 April 1925.
[37] TCA, Volume-Road 3, 'The Overland Desert Mail: The Direct Road to the East', *The Nairn Transport Company* [no date]: 'The City of the Caliphs appeals to the imagination chiefly by its associations with the Thousand and One Nights. It is a city which possesses to the full [the] colour, glamour and romance of the East, despite the coming of Western civilization with the British Army and the Mandate.'
[38] *Maps of Iraq with Notes for Visitors* (Baghdad: Government of Iraq, 1929). See also *A Guide to the Collections in the Iraq Museum* (Baghdad: The Government Press,1937).
[39] TCA, *Tours to Mesopotamia*.
[40] Rami Farouk Daher, *Tourism in the Middle East*, pp. 5–7.
[41] Priya Satia, '"A Rebellion of Technology". Development, Policing, and the British Arabian Imaginary', p. 26.

century, and likewise in Mesopotamia in the early twentieth century, were driven by 'the desire to identify the already defined signs of exoticism as exotic'.[42]

However, for these 'belated travellers' who were conscious of being the successors of generations of Orientalist scholars and travellers and therefore anxious to discover the authenticity of a changing 'Orient', the journey to Iraq was sometimes a source of disappointment.[43] Many travellers pointed out that Baghdad was no longer the city of Harun al-Rashid's time and, moreover, that it did not at all match the representations that Europeans had of it.[44] As the Swiss journalist William Martin put it: 'All of you who have read the Arabian Nights must free your minds from a double illusion.'[45] Various travellers deplored the technological innovations, infrastructural developments and tourism expansion which, in their view, were definitely changing the character of Baghdad. The author of *A Sojourn in Iraq* noted that European travellers who 'had hoped to see something fresh from the pages of the *Arabian Nights*' would be very surprised when they arrived in Baghdad: 'During the busy hours of the day it is a honking bedlam of motor cars and horse-drawn carriages. It has lost all traces of Oriental character […].'[46] The car thus held an ambivalent position; while it made it easier for travellers to get to Iraq, it also produced, for some, a sense of disenchantment and even 'desecration'[47] of an imagined 'Orient'.[48] Tourism promoters took these stories of disappointed Europeans into account and adapted their marketing strategies accordingly. Already in 1924, the *Cook's Traveller's Handbook for Palestine and Syria*, which included a section on Iraq, quoted the travelogue of the British writer Ethel S. Stevans, which read: 'If the buildings of [the] Baghdad of the Caliphs have vanished, the modern town still holds much that make the

[42] Ali Behdad, *Belated Travelers: Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), p. 48.
[43] Ibid., p. 13. On the 'quest for authenticity' as a motivation for travel, see also Ellen Badone, 'Crossing Boundaries: Exploring the Borderlands of Ethnography, Tourism, and Pilgrimage', in Ellen Badone and Sharon R. Roseman (eds.), *Intersecting Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage and Tourism* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), p. 182.
[44] James Canton, *From Cairo to Baghdad: British Travellers in Arabia*, pp. 129–154.
[45] William Martin, 'Bagdad', *Le Journal de Genève*, 21 November 1929, p. 1. For other similar comments, see Henry Barué, *De Saïgon à Paris, par voie de terre* (Saigon: Auto Club Sud Indochinois, 1936), p. 64; Paul D. Cravath, *Letters Home from India and Irak* (New York: Cravath, 1925), p. 136; Maurice Pernot, 'L'inquiétude de l'Orient : X : L'Irak et la Syrie', *Revue des Deux Mondes* 38:3 (April 1927), p. 534.
[46] Miles Peregrinus, 'A Sojourn in Iraq,' *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, 26/103 (September 1937), p. 447. For a similar comment, see also Robert J. Casey, *Baghdad & Points East* (New York: J.H. Sears, 1928), p. 8.
[47] At a lecture held at the Royal Central Asian Society in 1923, a debate arose between the lecturer, Major Holt, and a member of the audience who claimed that the car was causing the 'desecration' of the desert. Major Holt replied, jokingly: 'The sentimental question of the desecration of the desert is entirely a personal equation. If the desert was desecrated by motor-cars, still more so was it desecrated by the empty bottles and tins [that] once contained bully beef, that I have seen lying about there. (Laughter).' See Major Holt, 'Some Journeys in the Syrian Desert', *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society* 10:3 (1923) p. 191.
[48] James Duncan and Derek Gregory, *Writes of Passage: Reading Travel Writing* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 7.

stories told by Scheherazade to her sleepless spouse seem possible […].'[49] Several years later, Thomas Cook & Son recommended that travellers visit the Old City of Baghdad, presented as a niche where the so-called authentic character of the city was preserved:

> In Old Baghdad there is little sign of the modern progress which tends to make some Oriental cities disappointing. The Baghdad merchant still carries on his business from a tiny shop cut into the wall, camel caravans push their leisurely way through the crowded bazaars while the various types of native people, with their different customs and dress, cannot fail to make a strong appeal.[50]

Thomas Cook & Son and the major transport companies operating across the desert helped create the infrastructural and promotional conditions for the development of European tourism in Iraq alongside the travellers themselves, who influenced the way Iraq was sold to tourists by publishing their travel accounts. These actors contributed to the extension of trans-Mediterranean tourist circuits to include Iraq and therefore helped to inscribe the Baghdad–Damascus route into transregional mobility networks. Meanwhile, the Baghdad–Damascus route was also becoming a passageway for long-distance mobility centring on pilgrimages.

Pilgrims on their way to Mecca

In the interwar period, a growing number of pilgrims appropriated motorised transport for undertaking local and regional pilgrimages.[51] Pilgrims also availed of the expansion of motorised transport between Baghdad and Damascus. In May 1923, the British consul in Damascus noted that thirty pilgrims wishing to travel to Karbala had approached Mohammad al-Bassam to arrange for transportation to Iraq.[52] Simultaneously, the Baghdad–Damascus route diverted many hajj pilgrims from Central and South Asia away from the sea routes. As the French High Commissioner reported in 1924, Iraqi, Iranian and Indian pilgrims had taken the transdesert routes to Syria on their way to Mecca.[53] To be sure, pilgrims did not start travelling through Baghdad and Damascus with the advent of motorised transport. The opening of the

[49] TCA, Harry Charles Luke, *Cook's Traveller's Handbook for Palestine and Syria* (London: Simpkin Marshall: 1924), p. 430. For similar comments by travellers, see Ernest Main, *In and Around Baghdad* (Baghdad: The Times Press, date unknown), p. 11; William Martin: 'Des rives de la Méditerranée à celles de l'Euphrate', *Journal de Genève*, 17 November 1930, p. 2.
[50] TCA, Thomas Cook & Son, *How to See Baghdad, Babylon, Ctesiphon, etc.*, 1936, p. 1.
[51] Toufoul Abou-Hodeib, 'Sanctity across the Border: Pilgrimage Routes and State Control in Mandate Lebanon and Palestine', in Cyrus Schayegh and Andrew Arsan (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of the History of the Middle East Mandates* (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 383–394. On the use of cars by hajj pilgrims in the Hijaz, see Luc Chantre, *Pèlerinages d'empire: Une histoire européenne du pèlerinage à la Mecque* (Paris: Editions de la Sorbonne, 2018), pp. 266–268.
[52] TNA, FO 371/9013, British Consul Palmer to the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Damascus, 4 May 1923.
[53] CADC, 48CPCOM42, High Commissioner Weygand to the French Foreign Minister, Aley, 6 August 1924.

Hijaz Railway in the early twentieth century had already drawn back some of the Central Asian pilgrims who over the course of the nineteenth century had deserted the overland Damascus route for the sea route.[54] The presence in Damascus of inns funded through Indian endowments that offered accommodation for pilgrims also shows that the city was visited by pilgrims from India before the First World War.[55] Nevertheless, the interwar period saw a significant increase in pilgrims from Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan and India, who travelled to Mecca via the Syrian Desert.

According to the British report on Iraq, submitted to the League of Nations in 1927, 1,177 Iraqis and about 2,000 Iranians left for Mecca that year and, with few exceptions, took the Baghdad–Damascus route before continuing to the Hijaz. Statistics compiled in 1927 from the border post of Ramadi indicated that 397 Syrians, 1,953 Persians, 81 Indians and 30 Afghans entered Iraq as pilgrims.[56] While the Syrians definitely travelled to Iraq to visit the holy shrines (*ziyāra*), pilgrims of other nationalities were returning from Mecca. A comparison with the figures contained in the French report to the League of Nations for the same year reveals some divergence. Among those who crossed Syria on their way back from the hajj and continued on to their home country were 540 Iraqis, 1,380 Persians, 24 Afghans and only 22 British Indians. Yet the scale is comparable: more than a thousand Persians and a few dozen Indians.[57] The French statistics for 1928 on hajj pilgrims passing through Beirut on their way out and on their return show some increase in the number of Iraqi pilgrims transiting through Syria compared with the figures for the previous year (Table 6).[58] Commenting on these statistics, the British consul in Beirut also noted that the number of Iranian pilgrims recorded for the return journey was ten times higher than the figure for the outbound journey, but he offered no explanation for this.[59] It is likely that some of the pilgrims left Iran via northern

[54] Ezzerelli Kaïs, 'Le pèlerinage à La Mecque au temps du chemin de fer du Hedjaz (1908-1914)' in Sylvia Chiffoleau and Anna Madœuf (eds.), *Les pèlerinages au Maghreb et au Moyen-Orient: Espaces publics, espaces du public*, eds. (Beirut: Presses de l'Ifpo, 2005), pp. 167–191; Abdul-Karim Rafeq, 'Damascus and the Pilgrim Caravan', in Leila T. Fawaz and Christopher A. Bayly (eds.), *Modernity and Culture: From the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 140.
[55] James Casey, 'Sacred Surveillance: Indian Muslims, Waqf, and the Evolution of State Power in French Mandate Syria', in James R. Fichter (ed.), *British and French Colonialism in Africa, Asia and the Middle East: Connected Empires across the Eighteenth to the Twentieth Centuries* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 89–110.
[56] LON, R2314/6A/6774/655, British Report to the League of Nations on the Administration of Iraq for the Year 1927, pp. 70, 88.
[57] LON, R2307/6A/536/4361, French Report to the League of Nations on the Administration of Syria and Lebanon for 1927, p. 71.
[58] For the statistics, see LON, R2308/6A/12609/536, French Report to the League of Nations on the Administration of Syria and Lebanon for 1928, p. 70.
[59] BL, IOR/L/PJ/7/771 – 4330, Consul-General Satow to Sir Austen Chamberlain, Beirut, 22 December 1928.

routes passing through Russia and, furthermore, that some had left for the Hijaz in 1927 and only returned in 1928.[60]

TABLE 6: HAJJ PILGRIMS PASSING THROUGH BEIRUT ON THEIR WAY TO AND FROM MECCA, 1928

	Outbound journey			Return journey		
	By land	By sea	Total	By land	By sea	Total
Syrians/Lebanese	61	1,191	1,252	43	1,244	1,287
Iraqis	540	1,053	1,593	326	936	1,262
Iranians	91	168	259	1,229	1,649	2,878
Afghans	27	157	184	2	100	102
Indians	0	11	11	19	7	26

As these statistics show, Indian pilgrims who travelled via the transdesert routes were far fewer in number than Iranians. According to the statistics compiled on behalf of the British government in India, large numbers of Indian Shiite pilgrims visited the shrines of Iraq annually, but those who travelled through Iraq and Syria on their way to Mecca varied in number between 174 (in 1929) and 25 (in 1936), as illustrated in the graph below (Figure 15).[61] The motivations of these few dozen Indian pilgrims to take the overland route were diverse. Following the transdesert route enabled them to combine the hajj with a visit to the holy sites of Iraq and Syria, but this route could also save them from seasickness. On the other hand, the overland route entailed many disadvantages in terms of cost, passport formalities and health checks. A pilgrim had to spend about 500 rupees for the return journey from Bombay to Jeddah via Syria and Egypt, whereas he would spend no more than 150 rupees travelling by sea from Bombay to Jeddah and back.[62] For this reason, the number of Indian pilgrims travelling on the transdesert routes was not very large compared with those who visited the Iraqi shrines. In fact, these pilgrims were usually fairly well off. Post-war developments in transport facilities between Iraq and Syria offered wealthy Indian pilgrims the opportunity to visit these regions on their way to Mecca. As Nile Green has shown for steam travel, one way in which developments in transportation 'transformed the geography of the hajj as a journey' was that

[60] According to the British consul in Tehran, the Iranian ban caused 'many more pilgrims than usual to proceed via Soviet Russia and India.' TNA, FO 371/12999, the British Legation to the Foreign Office, Tehran, 4 May 1928. Similar explanations can be found for the greater number of Iranian pilgrims on the return journey in1929: LON, R2315/6A/22103/655, British Report to the League of Nations on the Administration of Iraq for 1929, p. 63. See also Eileen Kane, *Russian Hajj: Empire and the Pilgrimage to Mecca* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), pp. 157–182.

[61] For statistics on the number of Indian pilgrims who took the Baghdad–Damascus route between 1929 and 1936, see the annual reports of the Protector of Indian Pilgrims in Baghdad: TNA, CO 730/159/2; BL, IOR/L/E/7/1558, File 162; TNA, FO 624/3/12; TNA, FO 624/7/ 368; TNA, FO 624/9/332.

[62] TNA, CO 730/159/2, Report for 1929 on the Work of the Protector of British Indian Pilgrims.

they enabled some pilgrims 'to use the hajj as an excuse to take the long way round' and visit many places on their way to the Hijaz.[63]

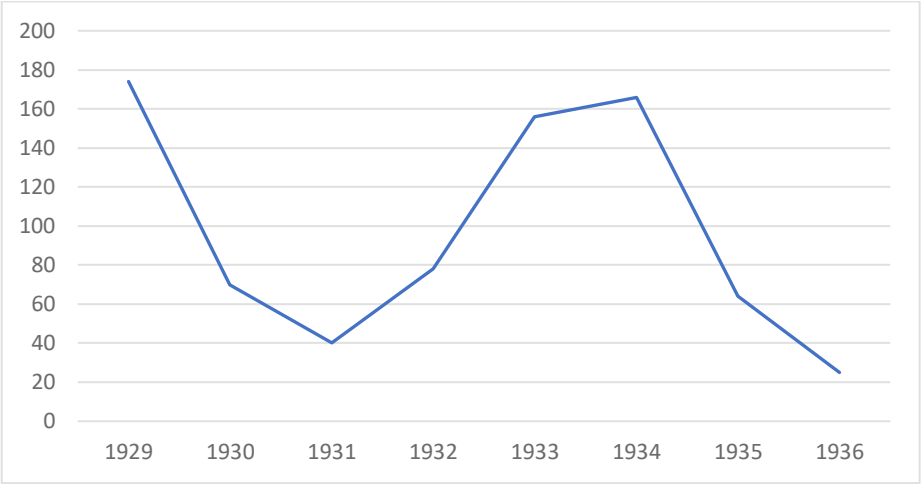

FIGURE 15: NUMBERS OF INDIAN PILGRIMS WHO TRAVELLED FROM IRAQ TO SYRIA (1929–1936)

The integration of the Baghdad–Damascus route into transregional networks of pilgrimage mobility prompted reactions from governments and authorities concerned about the increasing movement of pilgrims along overland routes. In January 1928, the British administrative inspector in Diwaniyya noted that Indian pilgrims did not receive any official assistance in Iraq except for that offered by an employee of the Iraqi Railways. As he pointed out, however, this inspector was not 'concerned with the considerable proportion of the pilgrims who travel[led] by road.'[64] The attached memorandum proposed the appointment of a Protector of British Indian Pilgrims who would provide pilgrims with 'full information regarding rail and road services and [would] assist them in their travels as far as possible'.[65] The idea was to re-establish a representative of the Indian government in the region, as was the case before the war when a British Indian vice-consul was based in Karbala and provided assistance to Indian pilgrims visiting the Shiite shrines in Mesopotamia.[66] The appointment of the first Protector of British Indian Pilgrims on 5 December 1928 reflected the Indian government's awareness of

[63] Nile Green, 'The Hajj as Its Own Undoing: Infrastructure and Integration on the Muslim Journey to Mecca'. *Past & Present* 226:1 (2015), pp. 193–226. See also: Nile Green, 'The Rail Hajjis: The Trans-Siberian Railway and the Long Way to Mecca', in Venetia Porter and Liana Saif (eds.), *The Hajj: Collected Essays* (London: The British Museum, 2013), pp. 100–107.

[64] BL, IOR/L/E/7/1479, File 6742, Kitching (Administrative Inspector) to the Political Secretary to the Government of India, Diwaniyah, 5 January 1928.

[65] BL, IOR/L/E/7/1479, File 6742, Memorandum Regarding the Proposed Duties of the Protector of British Indian Pilgrims in Iraq, no date.

[66] BL, IOR/L/E/7/1479, File 6742, Kitching (Administrative Inspector, Diwaniyah) to the Political Secretary to the Government of India, Diwaniyah, 5 January 1928. Indian pilgrims also benefited from a social and institutional network in the region, as many of them had come to settle in the holy cities of Karbala and Najaf in the mid-nineteenth century after the Indian Mutiny of 1857. See John Slight, *The British Empire and the Hajj* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 50.

the increasing number of Indian pilgrims visiting Iraq and travelling to Mecca via Iraq and Syria.[67]

The development of the Baghdad–Damascus route into an overland pilgrimage route also drew the attention of the Permanent Committee of the *Office International d'Hygiène Publique* (OIHP), which expressed concern about 'the multiplication of the different land routes' spawned by developments in rail and road transportation and called for international coordination.[68] Health concerns led to meetings and arrangements between multiple national, imperial and international actors.[69] A Conference on the Muslim Pilgrimage was held in Beirut in January 1929 on the initiative of French members of the OIHP to discuss possible ways of setting up a more permanent system for supervising the mobility of pilgrims—as the French medical officer, Dr Duguet, had wished in the wake of the cholera epidemic of 1927.[70] The conference brought together representatives of Egypt and the five French and British Mandate states, as well as a delegate from the *Conseil sanitaire d'Alexandrie*. The recommendations included the introduction of a pilgrimage passport with the bearer's photograph and fingerprint as well as the obligation for pilgrims to be vaccinated against smallpox and cholera. Moreover, it was recommended that pilgrims be required to pay a deposit and present a return ticket to obtain a pilgrimage visa.[71] These two measures were aimed at solving the problem of indigent pilgrims whom the various governments did not want to have to repatriate at their own expense.[72] Another consequence of the conference was the mutual decision to channel and monitor pilgrim flows along a limited number of pilgrimage routes through the Mandate states. For their part, the French made it compulsory for Syrians and Lebanese to embark at the port

[67] IOR/L/E/7/1558, File 162, Empson (consular secretary to the High Commissioner) to the Government of India, Baghdad, 12 August 1930.
[68] TNA, CO 732/31/9, Permanent Committee of the *Office International d'Hygiene Publique*, session held on 28 October 1928.
[69] Valeska Huber, 'International Bodies: The Pilgrimage to Mecca and the Emergence of International Health Regulations', in Eric Tagliacozzo and Shawkat M. Toorawa (eds.), *The Hajj: Pilgrimage in Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 175–195.
[70] See Chapter 4.
[71] Luc Chantre, *Pèlerinages d'empire: Une histoire européenne du pèlerinage à la Mecque* (Paris: Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2018), pp. 255–256; Sylvia Chiffoleau, 'Les quarantaines au Moyen-Orient: vecteurs ambigus de la modernité médicale (XIXe–XXe siècles)', in Anne Marie Moulin and Yeşim Işıl Ulman (eds), *Perilous Modernity: History of Medicine in the Ottoman Empire and the Middle East from the 19th Century Onwards*' (Istanbul: The Isis Press, 2010), pp. 144–145; Sylvia Chiffoleau, 'Entre bienfaisance, contrôle des populations et agenda international : la politique sanitaire du mandat français en Syrie et au Liban', *Canadian Bulletin of Medical History* 30:2 (2013), pp. 99–100; Sylvia Chiffoleau, *Le Voyage à La Mecque: Un pèlerinage mondial en terre d'Islam* (Paris : Belin, 2015), pp. 188–192; Valeska Huber, 'International Bodies', pp. 175–195.
[72] BL, IOR/L/E/7/1558, file 162, 'Memorandum on Pilgrimage to the Holy Cities of Islam in Iraq by British Indians and Subjects of the Native States of India', British Consulate, Basra, 21 January 1930.

of Beirut, thus prohibiting them from travelling overland across Palestine or Transjordan. Syria's land borders nevertheless remained open to pilgrims from Iraq.[73]

In conclusion, the development of transdesert traffic made the Baghdad–Damascus route a global crossroads for transregional movements of travellers, tourists and pilgrims, who adopted this route as much out of convenience as out of an interest in visiting newly accessible and desirable places. These mobility patterns consolidated the Syrian–Iraqi space as a passage between the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf as well as between Iran and the Arabian Peninsula, intensifying the transregional connections of the caravan trade and extending them to the realm of leisure mobility and sightseeing. The following section investigates the process by which the transdesert transport system became embedded in transregional transport networks. Specifically, it examines the interconnections of different modes and networks of transport, the role of local actors in achieving this process and the mutual influences of long-distance movements and the business of transdesert transport.

Interlocking Networks

An article published in *The Traveller's Gazette* in March 1924, headlined 'To Baghdad in Nine Days', detailed various possible routes between London and Baghdad. Travellers could leave London by train, travelling overland to Marseille (except for crossing the English Channel on a train ferry), then board a steamer of the Peninsular and Oriental (P&O) Steam Navigation Company for Port Said. From there, they could continue by train via Al-Qantara to Haifa, travelling onward by car along the coast to Beirut, and finally stepping into a car provided by the Nairn Transport Company. These transport networks put Baghdad within nine days of travel from London.[74] Egypt was a common transit point between Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean at the time, as Alexandria had been a central port at which different shipping routes converged since the 1860s.[75] The railway line built by the British forces between Cairo

[73] TNA, CO 732/39/9, Resolutions Adopted by the Delegates to the Conference on the Muslim Pilgrimage, Beirut, 17–18 January 1929; Pilgrim Notification No. 2, *Iraq Government Gazette*, published in the press on 8–9 March 1929.

[74] TCA, 'To Baghdad in Nine Days: Further Notes on the Syria-Iraq Motor Route', *The Traveller's Gazette* 74:3 (March 1924), p. 10.

[75] On shipping companies in the Mediterranean, see David Abulafia, *The Great Sea: A Human History of the Mediterranean* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 555–561; Marie-Françoise Berneron-Couvenhes, *Les Messageries Maritimes: L'essor d'une grande compagnie de navigation française, 1851-1894* (Paris: Presses de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2007), pp. 126–128, 435–437; Freda Harcourt, *Flagships of Imperialism: The P&O Company and the Politics of Empire From its Origins to 1867* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), pp. 67–85; John Perry, 'A Shared Sea: The Axes of French and British Imperialism in the Mediterranean, 1798–1914', in James R. Fichter (ed.), *British and French Colonialism in Africa, Asia and the Middle East*, pp. 121–124. On the development of tourism circuits in Egypt by Thomas Cook & Son since the late 1860s, see Xavier Guillot, 'From One Globalization to Another: In Search of the Seeds of Modern Tourism in the Levant, a Western

and Haifa during the First World War also facilitated travel between Egypt, Palestine and Syria.[76] Thus, by the mid-1920s, the Nairn Transport Company and the Eastern Transport Company—now re-organised and renamed BBTA—informed their clients of 'connections with Europe', which almost always were via Egypt.[77] Whatever route was taken between London and Baghdad, the journey usually combined stretches by train, ship and car.

At the other side, travellers arriving in Baghdad could continue across Iraq and further east using other multimodal transport networks. In 1919, the Iraqi railway network built during the war linked Baghdad to Basra in the south, Shargat in the north and Khanaqin in the east, near the Persian border.[78] Most of the time, European tourists used the Iraqi Railways to travel around Iraq and reach the main archaeological sites. Travellers could even book a sleeping carriage, which could be detached from the train at the various stations where they wished to spend a few days visiting the surroundings.[79] To continue on to Iran, most travellers arriving in Baghdad took the night train to Khanaqin before getting back into a car and continuing towards Tehran.[80] The Baghdad–Khanaqin railway line was also used by transport companies that preferred to put their cars on the train rather than drive them on the poorly maintained road from Baghdad to the Iranian border. The Eastern Transport Company did this when operating a service from Beirut to Tehran in 1925.[81] This practice became even more common among

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Perspective', in Rami Farouk Daher (ed.), *Tourism in the Middle East: Continuity, Change and Transformation* (Clevedon: Channel View Publications, 2007), pp. 95–110; Waleed Hazbun, 'The East as an Exhibit: Thomas Cook & Son and the Origins of the International Tourism Industry in Egypt', in Philip Scranton and Janet F. Davidson (eds.), *The Business of Tourism*, pp. 3–33; Robert Hunter, 'Tourism and Empire: The Thomas Cook & Son Enterprise on the Nile, 1868–1914', *Middle Eastern Studies* 40:5 (2004), pp. 28–54.

[76] Jacob Norris, *Land of Progress: Palestine in the Age of Colonial Development, 1905-1948* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 63–64, 100; Cyrus Schayegh, *The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), p. 101.

[77] NARA, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Asia, 1910-1929, roll 16, File 890d.79790g/1, circulars produced by the Eastern Transport Company and the Nairn Transport Company, transmitted by John Randolph (U.S. consul) to the Department of State, Baghdad, 16 April 1925; NARA, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Persia, 1910–1929, microfilm roll 32, File 891.797, George Gregg Fuller (U.S. vice consul) to the Department of State, Tehran, 25 January 1925.

[78] By 1929, a fourth line ran north from Baghdad to Kirkuk (with plans to extend it to Mosul), and a branch of the Basra line led to Karbala. See Morton B. Stratton, 'British Railways and Motor Roads in the Middle East, 1918-1930', *Economic Geography* 20:2 (1944), p. 116; *Maps of Iraq with Notes for Visitors* (Baghdad: Government of Iraq, 1929), pp. 8–9.

[79] TCA, 'A Land Made Fit for Tourists: The Remarkable Development of Mesopotamia', *The Traveller's Gazette* No. 12 (December 1923), p. 11; TCA, Harry Charles Luke, *Cook's Traveller's Handbook for Palestine and Syria* (London: Simpkin Marshall: 1924), pp. 411–413 (and further editions for 1929 and 1934).

[80] CADC, 48CPCOM42, 'Note sur la route Beyrouth-Téhéran', military attaché to the French Legation in Persia, 7 November 1923; NARA, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Persia, 1910-1929, microfilm roll 32, File 891.797, Robert W. Imbrie (U.S. consul) to the Department of State, Tehran, 27 May 1924.

[81] CADC, 48CPCOM42, Gilly (Director, *Office Commercial*) to the *Office National du Commerce Extérieur*, Beirut, 5 December 1923; TNA, FO 371/10093, 'Report on the Beirut-Bagdad-Tehran Motor Route', drawn up by Acting British Consul Mayers, Beirut, 26 October 1924; CADN, 1SL/1/V/702, report sent by the Director of the *Office Commercial Français pour la Syrie* transmitted to the French High Commissioner, 1 July 1925.

motorists and transport companies in the late 1920s, when complications relating to customs duties imposed by the Iranian authorities provided new incentives to use the train and then continue the journey with a car registered in Iran.[82] In addition, the Iraqi Railways provided the main link between Baghdad and Basra in the south, from where passengers could embark for India. The railway company operated a weekly fast mail service in conjunction with the shipping postal service on the Persian Gulf and a daily slow service reaching Basra in 28 hours.[83] From there, the British India Steam Navigation Company operated two services across the Persian Gulf to Karachi and onwards to Bombay. These services were offered as a weekly fast mail service to Bombay completed in seven days and a fortnightly slow service, which entailed the same journey made in two to three weeks.[84]

In search of the best match

The interweaving of the transdesert routes into wider mobility networks did not occur spontaneously; rather, it resulted from the arrangements made between the different companies that operated them. The Nairn Transport Company placed great importance on the maritime and rail connections that enabled it to extend its service west and east of the Baghdad–Damascus route, as shown on a map often included in its promotional materials (Figure 16).[85] From the beginning, the company tried to establish a good match between their service and that of companies operating from Baghdad, on the one hand, and from Beirut and Haifa, on the other hand. Thus, starting in 1924, passengers of the Nairn Transport Company who arrived in Baghdad and wanted to continue their journeys to Iran were transferred to cars belonging to the Parsons Transport Company, a small British company with which the Nairn brothers collaborated.[86] Then, commencing from 1926, they worked with another British-owned company, the Price Transport Company, on the same route. This company provided a regular transport service between Tehran and Baghdad that connected with the schedules of the Nairn's

[82] The American Chamber of Commerce for the Levant, 'Motor Transport in Syria and Persia Rapidly Expanding', *The Levant Trade Review* 17:11 (December 192 9), p. 406. http://www.dlir.org/arit-absc-about/205.html (accessed 26 May 2022).
[83] TCA, 'The Railways of Iraq', *The Traveller's Gazette* (March 1928), p. 19.
[84] BL, IOR/L/E/7/1558, File 162, Report for 1930 and 1931 on the Work of the Protector of British Indian Pilgrims, Baghdad, p. 3; C. Dalrymple Belgrave, 'The Overland Route to the Persian Gulf', *Journal of the Central Asian Society* 18:4 (1931), p. 562. For a short history of the British India Steam Navigation Company, see *Michael Quentin Morton*, 'The British India Line in the Arabian Gulf, 1862-1982', *Liwa Journal* 5:10 (2013), pp. 40–63.
[85] SALT Research, Harika-Kemali Söylemezoğlu Archive, Nairn Eastern Transport Company, 'Motor Transport across the Syrian Desert: Damascus–Baghdad', date unknown.
https://archives.saltresearch.org/handle/123456789/13850 (accessed 4 June 20220).
[86] TNA, FO 371/10093, 'Report on a Trip on the Tehran-Baghdad Road' by Acting Vice Consul Norman Mayers, Beirut, 26 October 1924.

convoys, so that passengers bound for Damascus lost the least amount of time possible in Baghdad.[87] The Nairn Transport Company also endeavoured to establish a good match between their service and the shipping lines crossing the Mediterranean. In November 1923, the *Messageries Maritimes* had already proposed consolidated tickets for the trip from London to Baghdad via Marseilles, thereby combining the services of the two companies.[88] During the Great Syrian Revolt, discussions were held in British circles about re-routing the Nairn service to the Amman route (see Chapter 2). At this time, Norman Nairn reminded the British that the *Messageries Maritimes* had given preference to their passengers on the condition that they pass through Beirut. Diverting traffic would therefore be an issue, as his company could not afford to forgo their connection with the shipping company. British Consul Smart conveyed Norman Nairn's position to the Foreign Office in October 1925 with this telling statement: 'The trans-desert service was only a link in the chain. Without [an] adequate and regular shipping connection, it must be a failure.'[89]

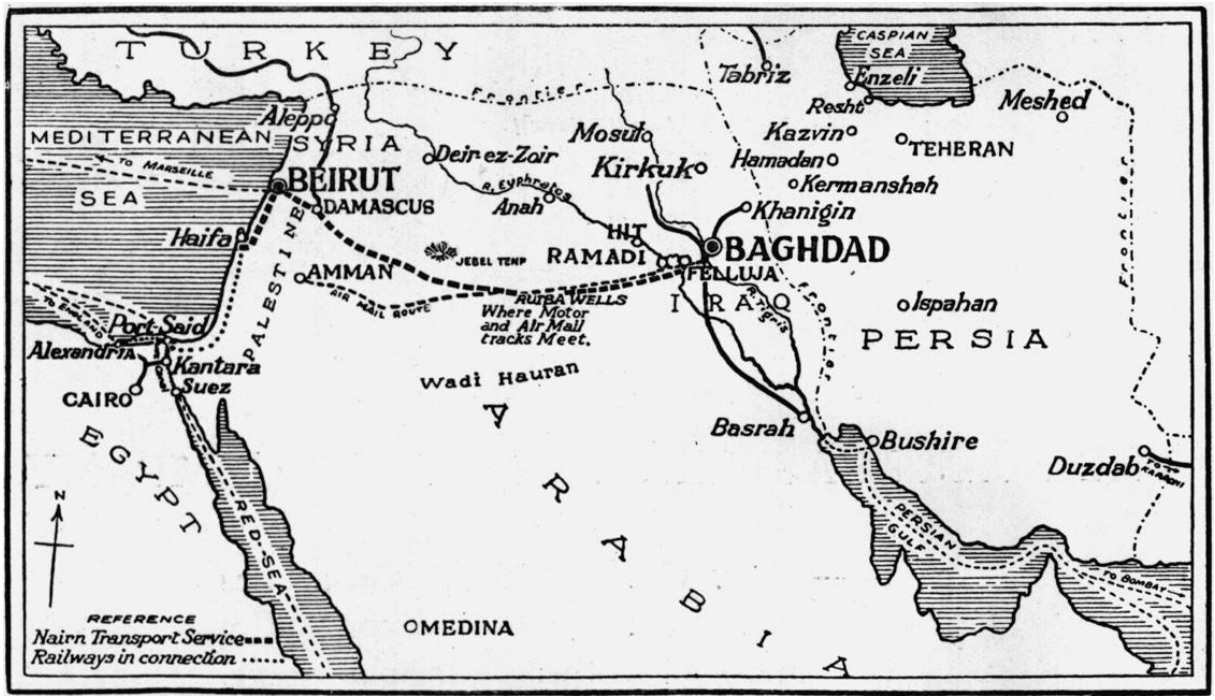

FIGURE 16: MAP OF THE SERVICE OF THE NAIRN EASTERN TRANSPORT COMPANY, WITH CONNECTIONS

Image credit: SALT Research, Harika-Kemali Söylemezoğlu Archive, Leaflet by the Nairn Eastern Transport Company entitled: 'Motor Transport across the Syrian Desert: Damascus–Baghdad' (Creative Common).

[87] TNA, FO 371/11466, the British Legation to the Department of Overseas Trade, Teheran, 10 March 1926.
[88] MECA, Nairn Transport Collection, advertising enclosed in 'The Desert Route to Baghdad', *The Near East*, 1 November 1923, p. 455.
[89] TNA, FO 371/10831, British Consul Smart to the Foreign Office, Damascus, 1 October 1925.

While the importance of connections between transdesert and maritime transportation was particularly important for European travellers and tourists moving between Syria/Iraq and Europe, it was perhaps even more important for the transport of mail. During the Great Syrian Revolt, the Nairn brothers were once again asked to shift the departure times of their convoys to match those of the Eastern Transport Company, so that the French could organise a joint armed escort for both companies. The Nairn rejected the French request outright, insisting that their convoys had to connect with the arrival in Beirut and Haifa of the steamers carrying mail from Europe and vice versa. Again, the British consul in Beirut relayed Norman Nairn's position, commenting sarcastically: 'It had not apparently occurred to the French Authorities that a world system of mail services could hardly be adjusted to suit temporary circumstances in Syria.'[90]

Some commentors considered that greater coordination was necessary for the transdesert routes to be truly integrated into a chain of transport networks extending from Europe to India. In an article published in the *Journal of The Royal Central Asian Society* in 1929, British officer H.E. Crockek lamented the lack of cooperation among transport companies.

> At the moment of writing, the various companies—steamship, railway and motor convoy—are each working on their own account, without thought of co-operation or co-ordination of the services. According to the timetables now in use, the journey from London to Karachi by the overland route takes twenty-one days. Unnecessary delays occur at many points on the journey, and the unhappy passenger finally has to wait six days at Baghdad for the reason that the motor convoy arrives one day too late to enable him to catch the mail steamer at Basra.[91]

For Crockek, only a comprehensive organisation of the various transport services could ensure a close correspondence between their services and thus avoid important delays for travellers crossing Iraq towards India.

Although no overall coordination of the different transport services was initiated, they nevertheless made adjustments amongst themselves. For Norman Nairn, the question of which transport service should adjust to the others seemed to boil down to a balance of power. In late 1925, when the company was planning to introduce cars of much greater capacity, Norman Nairn believed that '[u]ndoubtedly, with vehicles of such a large carrying capacity, steamship companies will have to make their sailing itineraries coincide with the arrival and departure of

[90] TNA, AIR 5/408, British Consul Smart to the High Commissioner for Iraq, Damascus, 15 September 1925.
[91] H. E. Crockek, 'The trans-desert routes to the East', *Journal of The Royal Central Asian Society* 16:3 (1929), p. 362.

the Desert mail Convoys.'[92] Much to his chagrin, however, the Nairn Transport Company remained dependent on the schedules of the shipping companies, and not the other way around.

As the ships of the different companies docked at the port of Haifa before continuing to Beirut, the Nairn Transport Company saw its turnover decrease in the mid-1930s at a time when traffic between Haifa and Baghdad was burgeoning. As long as the ships made a short stopover in Haifa, most of the passengers continued to Beirut to take the Nairn service to Baghdad, but when the stopover was longer, many were tempted to take the Haifa–Baghdad route. Consequently, in 1935, the Nairn Transport Company decided to inaugurate a transport service between Haifa and Damascus via the border post of Banat Yacoub that connected with the schedules of the shipping lines and with their service between Damascus and Baghdad.[93] Changes in the timetables of some shipping companies could also prompt the Nairn Transport Company to alter its own schedules, as the agent of Thomas Cook & Son pointed out:

> I am now advised by Jerry Nairn that he has decided in future to hold the Tuesday Convoy from Damascus until 2 p.m. so as to enable passengers by the Adriatica weekly service to land at Beyrouth and make the connexion with the Convoy from Damascus.[94]

Form the late 1920s onwards, the numerous traffic restrictions and border formalities appeared to be major obstacles to the forging of efficient connections between the different transport networks. In September 1928, the High Commissioner for Iraq informed the French that the convoys leaving for Baghdad were seriously delayed by passport formalities in Damascus.[95] In November 1929, the French consul in Baghdad also explained that travellers from Baghdad had difficulty catching their train in Damascus or their boat in Beirut, as the desert route was only open to traffic two days a week. Considering this problem, he noted that the British 'were very liberal in setting departure times' and allowed convoys to leave Rutba up to 10 hours ahead of schedule, so that travellers could reach Damascus at 6 am and finally Beirut at 9 am 'in time to catch the French couriers leaving the port at 12 pm'. However, he continued, passport formalities en route undermined British efforts, particularly as the Syrian border post at Abu Shamat did not open until 7 a.m. and worked very slowly, causing convoys to lose five to six hours.[96]

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[92] TNA, FO 371/10831, Norman Nairn to the High Commissioner for Iraq, Beirut, 28 October 1925.
[93] CADN, 1SL/1/V/702, Note by the Inspector General of Customs on transdesert exemptions, Beirut, 1 June 1935.
[94] TCA, Thomas Cook's agent to Thomas Cook & Son, Haifa, 17 September 1938.
[95] TNA, AIR 23/390, the secretary of the High Commissioner for Iraq to the British consul, Beirut, 15 September 1928.
[96] CADC, 50CPCOM358, Paul Lépissier to the French High Commissioner, Baghdad, 5 November 1929.

In 1929, the Iraqi mail contractor, Haim Nathaniel, complained about the poor performance of the border post at Abu Chamat. As he pointed out, his westbound convoys left Baghdad on Thursday morning and were due to arrive in Damascus on Friday morning for the mail to be transferred to the 8 o'clock train bound for Haifa. From there, the mail was carried by train to Port Said and then transferred onto the P&O liners departing each Sunday at noon for Marseilles, before continuing the journey from France to Britain. However, the border post at Abu Chamat was only open between 6.30 a.m. and 9 p.m., which caused significant delays for the convoys. This made it impossible for Haim Nathaniel to ensure timely delivery of the mail in Damascus to catch the connecting train to Haifa and Port Said. The postal authorities in Syria and Lebanon were very receptive to his complaint and asked the Inspector General of Police to see to it that customs formalities at Abu Chamat were eased and accelerated.[97]

In sum, the potential of the Baghdad–Damascus route to become a global crossroads provided additional incentives to accelerate transdesert traffic. This observation should not, however, lead one to conclude that global connections mitigated the process of state territorialisation. Indeed, as the previous chapter has shown, the intensification of mobility on a transregional scale—illustrated by the figure of Jacob Bercovitch and the movements of other people deemed 'undesirable'—led to the strengthening of border controls as well. The above observations do show, however, that the interweaving of the transdesert transport system into wider networks—and consequently the integration of the Baghdad–Damascus route into transregional routes—depended on matching different services and synchronising their schedules, for which delays could not be tolerated.

Hajj traffic: Opportunities and risks

Historical scholarship has widely emphasised the economic dimension of the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca. Throughout their journey, which could last many months in pre-modern times, pilgrims were consumers as much as they were traders. In the nineteenth century, the gradual shift from large caravans to steamships profoundly transformed the pilgrimage economy, while giving rise to increasingly important organisational, logistics and planning considerations.[98] Taking into account what Michael B. Miller calls 'the business of the hajj',

[97] CADN, 1SL/1/V/703, Note from the Inspector General of Posts, Beirut, 3 December 1929.

[98] Sylvia Chiffoleau, 'Economics: Agents, Pilgrims, and Profits', in Eric Tagliacozzo and Shawkat M. Toorawa (eds.), *The Hajj*, pp. 155–174; Michael B. Miller, 'Pilgrims' Progress: The Business of the Hajj', *Past & Present* 191:1 (2006), pp. 189–228. For the economic importance of hajj pilgrims to a city like Ma'an, see Norig Neveu, 'Repenser la périphérie : Ma'ān, carrefour du sud du Bilād al-Shām au tournant de la Première Guerre mondiale', *Arabian Humanities* No. 6 (2016), pp. 1–23. See also Michael Christopher Low, '"The Infidel Piloting the True

this section examines the interaction and reciprocal influence between the transregional movements of hajj pilgrims and the regional transport system connecting Baghdad and Damascus. In doing so, it shows how the integration of transdesert routes into transregional mobility networks reshaped the transport sector discussed in Chapter 3, which in turn shaped the travelling conditions of pilgrims.

From the very beginning, the transport of pilgrims between Iraq and Syria was regarded as a potentially profitable business.[99] Initial statistics on transdesert traffic support this view. While the number of travellers hovered around 200–300 per month during the first part of 1924, nearly 2,800 passengers travelled from Damascus to Baghdad between August and October, most of whom were pilgrims from Iraq and Iran returning from the Hijaz.[100] To accommodate this traffic, transport contractors tried to provide a service that was adapted to the pilgrims' demands. In June 1924, the Eastern Transport Company offered pilgrims passage across the desert for £10 in comparison to the £25 charged for the first-class service.[101] The very high number of pilgrims to be transported, combined with their relatively low purchasing power, prompted entrepreneurs to adapt their vehicle fleets. Companies wishing to transport hajj pilgrims needed to increase their transport capacities by hiring more cars and vehicles during certain times of the year. In 1927, a report produced by the Iraqi Ministry of the Interior on the business of transdesert transport highlighted the adaptability of the five transport companies operating between Baghdad and Damascus: 'The point is that these companies own a large number of cars to deal with their normal traffic and can at very short notice quadruple their transport capacity by hiring cars in Baghdad or in Syria.'[102] In addition, the companies put special vehicles into operation for the transport of pilgrims. At certain times of the year, trucks equipped with temporary wooden seats were used on the transdesert routes, as they had a large transport capacity.[103] The Eastern Transport Company, for example, used four one-and-a-half-ton trucks equipped to transport pilgrims.[104] In short, pilgrims' transport requirements led to

Believer": Thomas Cook and the Business of the Colonial Hajj', in Umar Ryad (ed.), *The Hajj and Europe in the Age of Empire* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2017), pp. 47–80.

[99] CADC, 48CPCOM42, French Consul Maigret to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Baghdad, 12 June 1923.

[100] TNA, FO 684/1/24/14, the British consul to the Department of Overseas Trade, Damascus, 6 November 1924; Raoul Blanchard, 'La route du désert de Syrie', *Annales de Géographie* 34:189 (1925), p. 243.

[101] TNA, FO 371/10093, Memorandum from Mr Kettaneh on 'The Position and Prospects of the Eastern Transport Co.', attached to a letter from the Department of Overseas Trade dated 11 September 1924.

[102] LON, R981/12B/49616/61055, the Ministry of Interior, Health Directorate to the *Conseil Sanitaire Maritime et Quarantenaire d'Egypte*, Baghdad, 18 August 1927.

[103] AUB, 'Pilgrimage to Mecca: By Ford from Eve's Tomb', *The Manchester Guardian*, 9 June 1927.

[104] CADC, 48CPCOM42, Bonzon (the French Minister in Iran) to High Commissioner Weygand, Tehran, 6 June 1924.

the use of hybrid vehicles, whereby vehicles used for freight transport were converted into vehicles for passenger transport during peak periods. As indicated by the statistics on traffic from Baghdad to Damascus for the months of January to August 1927, it was the number of lorry passengers that was especially high in April and May, which corresponded to the timing of the passage of pilgrims to Mecca (Figure 17).[105]

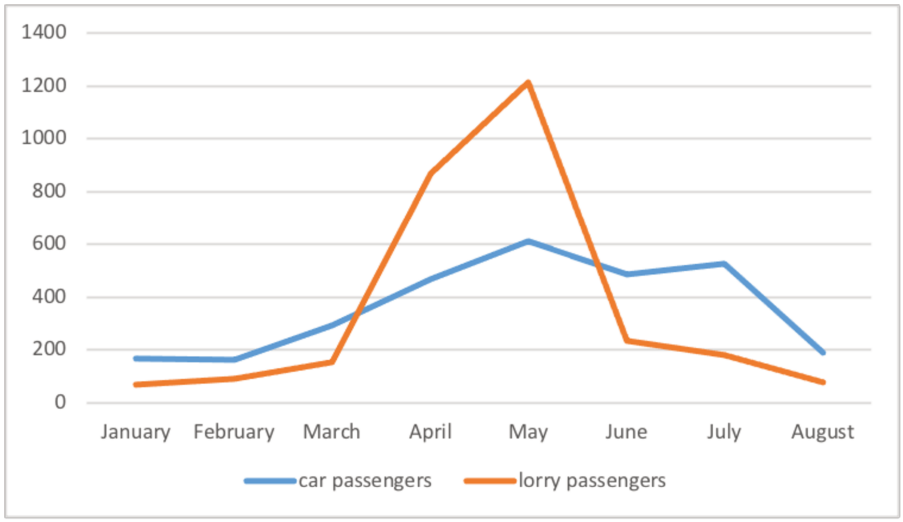

FIGURE 17: PASSENGERS FROM BAGHDAD TO DAMASCUS IN 1927 (TRAVELLING BY CAR AND LORRY)

It is noteworthy that the seasonal movements of pilgrims not only propelled transport companies to adapt their services to cater to this type of traffic but they also distorted the transport market. As stated in the above-mentioned report produced by the Iraqi Ministry of Interior, transport operators tried to carry as many pilgrims as possible from one side of the desert to the other during busy periods, while 'the cars in the reverse direction [carried] passengers for about £1 just to cover the cost of petrol'.[106] In other words, transdesert traffic flowed almost exclusively from east to west on the outward journey of pilgrims to Mecca and from west to east on their return. As the American vice-consul in Tehran pointed out in 1925, when pilgrims were travelling to Mecca, it was possible to find a driver going from Damascus to Baghdad for a fare that was five times cheaper than the usual price. Those who did not mind travelling in poor conditions could take one of these 'empty cars' for almost nothing.[107] Fares for travel in the opposite direction—from Baghdad to Damascus—tended to rise during the

[105] LON, R981/12B/49616/61055, statistics attached to a letter from the Ministry of Interior, Health Directorate, Baghdad to the *Conseil sanitaire maritime et quarantenaire*, Baghdad, 18 August 1927.
[106] Ibid.
[107] NARA, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Persia, 1910–1929, microfilm roll 32, File 891.797, George Gregg Fuller (U.S. vice consul) to the Department of State, Tehran, 25 January 1925.

pilgrims' outward journey, but fell just as drastically on their return, as the correspondent of *The Manchester Guardian* reported in 1927. He himself took advantage of this situation when making a trip to Beirut.

> Later on, after the day of Arafat, the crowning ceremony of the pilgrimage (which happens this year on June 11), the rush home will commence. As a result, scores of cars will have to travel "light" from Bagdad to Beyrout, for the trend of the traffic will be all in the opposite direction; and prices will drop accordingly as low as £1 or so. The writer was once offered a trip to Beyrout on a similar occasion for ten shillings, a fairly easy charge for a motor journey of close on 600 miles! The discriminating European who wants a holiday at home nowadays watches the incidence of the haj very closely, so as to take advantage of the most favourable market for the land portion of his journey.[108]

According to this correspondent, some travellers knew how to exploit to their advantage the disruption of the transport market caused by the large number of pilgrims crossing the desert at certain times of the year.

As the transport of pilgrims was an important source of revenue for some companies, changes in the scale of their movements could affect them significantly. And yet, the number of Iranian pilgrims travelling to Iraq was 'very variable' during the interwar period, as the British consul in Bushire (Iran) noted in February 1928: 'Some years there is plague (as in 1927) which stop all visits to the Holy Places. Other years, the Persian Government for reasons best known to itself placed an embargo on pilgrimage to Iraq.'[109] The numbers of those who left for the hajj varied in the same way. After being banned for two years by the Iranian government, the pilgrimage to Mecca was allowed again in the autumn of 1925, so the number of Iranian pilgrims, both to the holy cities in Iraq and through Iraq to the Hijaz, increased substantially.[110] Nevertheless, the Iranian government, under the reign of Reza Shah, once again banned its citizens from leaving the country on pilgrimage between 1927 and 1929, invoking the insecurity on the routes and the attitude of Ibn Saud, the new ruler of Mecca, as reasons for its decision. For the French *chargé d'affaires* in Tehran, the real reason was to be found in the Iranian government's desire to avoid the outflow of capital with the pilgrims.[111] In addition,

[108] AUB, 'Pilgrimage to Mecca: By Ford from Eve's Tomb', *The Manchester Guardian*, 9 June 1927, p. 18.
[109] BL, IOR/L/E/7/1479 – File 6742, Haworth (British Political Resident in the Persian Gulf) to the Foreign Office, Bushire, 2 February 1928.
[110] League, R59/1/17502/51544, Report by His Britannic Majesty's Government to the League of Nations on the Administration of 'Iraq for the Year 1925; 48CPCOM43, 'Rapport sur la question des transports vers l'Irak et la Perse par la route transcontinentale', 4 février 1926; BL, IOR/L/E/7/1450 – File 2160, the High Commissioner for Iraq to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Baghdad, 10 March 1926.
[111] CADN, 1SL/1/V/1044, Ballereau (the French *chargé d'affaires* in Iran) to the French High Commissioner, Tehran, 5 April 1927.

Reza Shah wanted to decrease Iran's connections with the holy cities of Iraq as well as to 'nationalise' Shia Islam in Iran by encouraging pilgrims to visit Iranian sites, such as Mashhad, rather than travelling abroad.[112]

In 1927, many pilgrims had already left by the time the ban was announced, and many others who had planned to leave managed to circumvent the ban by obtaining a visa for Iraq and then applying at the French consulate in Baghdad for a visa for Syria.[113] However, the following year, the ban caused a major drop in transdesert traffic. The decreased movements of pilgrims led to a reduction in the number of passengers by about 2,600 passengers relative to the number of passengers in 1927. This decline did not affect the Nairn Transport Company, which did not specifically cater to pilgrim traffic, but it did harm other companies.[114] In 1931, the Iranian government again banned its citizens from going on pilgrimage. Combined with the cholera epidemic in southern Iraq, this new ban greatly reduced the movements of pilgrims across the desert. The fall in the numbers of pilgrims was understood to be the main reason for an approximately 28% decrease in transdesert traffic between 1930 and 1931.[115]

Pilgrims' travel conditions

Conversely, transport companies and the organisation of traffic had an impact on pilgrims' travel conditions. An exclusive focus on the routes followed by pilgrims at a transregional scale entails a risk of obscuring the concrete difficulties and hardships that they may have experienced during their journeys. Consequently, this section brings to light these difficulties through its examination of the interactions of hajj pilgrims with the transdesert transport system, thereby avoiding a hollow narrative of increased connections devoid of human experience.[116]

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[112] Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 168–172; Alex Shams, 'From Guests of the Imam to Unwanted Foreigners: The Politics of South Asian Pilgrimage to Iran in the Twentieth Century', *Middle Eastern Studies* 57:4 (2021), p. 587.

[113] LON, R2314/6A/6774/655, British Report to the Council of the League of Nations on the Administration of Iraq for 1927, p. 88; CADN, 1SL/1/V/1044, the Iranian consul to the French High Commissioner, Damascus, 2 May 1927; the General Secretariat of the French High Commission to the Iranian consul, Beirut, 7 May 1927. For details on Iranian pilgrims who allegedly entered 'clandestinely' into Syria that year, see also Firmin Duguet, *Le Pèlerinage de la Mecque au point de vue religieux, social et sanitaire* (Paris: Rieder, 1932), p. 61.

[114] LON, R2315/6A/14172/655, British Report to the League of Nations on the Administration of Iraq for 1928, p. 52; TNA, FO 371/13475, British Consul Satow to the High Commissioner for Palestine, Beirut, 27 April 1929.

[115] AUB, 'Al-ḥujjāj al-īrāniyyūn wa limādha tarakū' ṭarīq bilādinā', *Al-Bayraq*, 3 January 1931, p. 3; AUB, Economic Conditions in Syria, (published) report by Sir Harold E. Satow, British consul general, Beirut, May 1932, p. 23.

[116] As Lâle Can points out, '[a]lthough writing global history invites comparison across empires, one of its pitfalls is that it produces a kind of conceptual flattening, where the specificity of certain relationships and dynamics gets lost, or, as in the Ottoman case, remains to be fully excavated. This problem is evident not only in the use of phrases such as "Muslim power" and "hajj patron" but in the emphasis on mapping hajj routes. Doing so highlights the impressive scope of interimperial connectivity, but insufficient attention to the scale and the depth of

Indeed, making the long journey to Mecca via the Baghdad–Damascus route was not a trivial undertaking for hajj pilgrims. A case in point is the way the Iraqi transport company, Huwaidi & Co., handled the pilgrims. Registered in Baghdad, the company was controlled by two Iraqi nationals, Muhammad Said Huwaidi and Abdul Ghani Huwaidi.[117] In 1929, many complaints were filed by pilgrims against the company. The Beiruti newspaper, *Al-Bayraq*, pointed out that according to a Lebanese police report, Afghan pilgrims had complained about the company, stating that they had bought return tickets on the outward journey to Mecca but were asked for a supplemental payment after they returned from the Hijaz.[118] The 1929 report of the Protector of British Indian Pilgrims in Iraq also mentioned various complaints received from Indian and Zanzibari pilgrims who had booked cars with Huwaidi & Co. for the journey from Iraq to Persia. However, when they arrived in Baghdad, they were not provided with any vehicles and were denied any refunds. Huwaidi & Co. was not the only company to be the subject of complaints for not fulfilling its commitments. A group of Indian pilgrims reported to the Protector that they had made arrangements with the Syrian National Company for the journey from Iraq to Syria but had not been provided with a car once they reached Baghdad. The company was forced to reimburse the pilgrims after the British authorities intervened.[119] Other pilgrims with return tickets complained that once they returned to Syria from the Hijaz, they found that transport companies gave preference to passengers who had paid in cash.[120]

The abusive practices of some companies within the transdesert transport sector were not the only factor affecting pilgrim traffic. In the summer of 1929, Huwaidi & Co. went bankrupt during the interval between the time of the pilgrims' outward journey and their return journey from the Hijaz. Yet, in compliance with the regulations in force, many pilgrims had been forced to buy a return ticket before leaving Baghdad so as to qualify for the pilgrimage visa. Therefore, when the returning pilgrim traffic peaked in July 1929, more than 200 pilgrims with Huwaidi tickets found themselves stranded in Beirut and Damascus and had to await assistance from the authorities.[121]

Numerous complaints were also lodged against other companies. Following the 1929 Muslim Pilgrimage Conference, the British Mesopotamia Persia Corporation was appointed as

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connections along various points in these maps runs the risk of distorting—flattening—the pilgrimage experience.' See Lâle Can, *Spiritual Subjects: Central Asian Pilgrims and the Ottoman Hajj at the End of Empire* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020), p. 25.

[117] TNA, CO 732/39/11, Extract from the Economic Report for the fortnight ended 13 December 1929.

[118] AUB, 'shakwā ḥujjāj', *Al-Bayraq*, 5 May 1929, p. 2.

[119] TNA, CO 730/159/2, Report for 1929 on the Work of the Protector of British Indian Pilgrims.

[120] IOR/L/E/7/1558, File 162, Report of the Protector of British Indian Pilgrims for 1932.

[121] TNA, FO 371/13745, extract from Economic Report No. 137, attached to a letter from the Colonial Office, London, 26 July 1929.

the 'official pilgrim transporters' in Iraq and was henceforth authorised to sell tickets to pilgrims for the entire return journey to Mecca on behalf of different transport companies in a bid to implement the new return ticket requirements but probably also under British pressure.[122] The Mesopotamia Persia Corporation sold about 2,000 tickets for the hajj of 1930, but the system did not prevent fierce competition between the various transdesert transport operators with whom they collaborated. By 1931, the Mesopotamia Persia Corporation had made arrangements with Haim Nathaniel for the transportation of pilgrims on the Baghdad–Damascus route.[123]

Pilgrims' complaints against the Mesopotamia Persia Corporation concerned unjustifiably high prices. In April 1929, the company's official rates in Rupees for the Baghdad–Haifa–Jeddah–Bombay trip were as follows: Rs. 565 (first class), Rs. 400 (second class) and Rs. 244 (third class).[124] However, many pilgrims arriving in the Hijaz from Iraq found that the Mesopotamia Persia Corporation had charged them higher than usual rates. In June 1930, the British Legation in Jeddah reported the case of two Indian pilgrims who had been charged Rs. 135 instead of the usual Rs. 55 for third-class travel and Rs. 315 instead of Rs. 200 for second-class travel during the sea journey from Jeddah to India.[125] The 1930 report on the pilgrimage added that the British Legation in Jeddah had received many more complaints from Indian pilgrims arriving in the Hijaz via Iraq than from pilgrims arriving directly by sea from India.[126] When asked to provide an explanation, the Mesopotamia Persia Corporation stated that the Khedivial Mail Line had changed its fares for the Jeddah–Karachi route during the year without informing the pilgrims and promised to refund the affected pilgrims.[127]

Similar complaints were made about the prices charged for the desert journey between Baghdad and Damascus, as testified by an Indian pilgrim before the Hajj Inquiry Committee in 1929. Hussain Mohammed Ladhiwalla reported that he arrived in Iraq in February 1929, where

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[122] TNA, FO 371/14456, Extract from Economic Report No. 4 for the fortnight ended 24 February 1930; BL, IOR/L/E/7/1558, File 162, the British consul to the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Jeddah, 12 June 1930; TNA, FO 371/14456, Extract from Iraq Economic Report No. 5 for the fortnight ended 10 March 1930. For more information on the company, see Stephanie Jones, *Two Centuries of Overseas Trading: The Origins and Growth of the Inchcape Group* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1986), pp. 79–109.

[123] BL, IOR/L/E/7/1558, File 162, Extract from an economic report sent to the Government of India on 9 July 1930; BL, IOR/L/E/7/1558, File 162, Extract from Economic Report No. 3, March 1931; AUB, 'I'lān muhim li-l-ḥujjāj', *Al-Bilad*, 1 April 1930, p. 4; 'Ākhir I'lān li-l-ḥujjāj al-karām', *Al-Bilad*, 17 April 1930, p. 6.

[124] TNA, CO 732/39/9, Telegram from the High Commissioner for Iraq to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in New Delhi, Baghdad, 6 April 1929.

[125] BL, IOR/L/E/7/1558, File 162, the British consul to the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Jeddah, 12 June 1930.

[126] TNA, FO 371/15290, Report on the Pilgrimage of 1930 produced by the British Legation in Jeddah, p. 24.

[127] IOR/L/E/7/1558, File 162, Hubert Young (Acting High Commissioner for Iraq) to the British Legation in Jeddah, Baghdad, 15 July 1930.

he visited different shrines before proceeding to Baghdad in mid-March for the desert journey. There, he learned that he had to deposit a financial guarantee and, above all, that he had to purchase a ticket from the Mesopotamia Persia Corporation, although he had already made the necessary arrangements with Shaban Transport Co. for the journey to Damascus. Nevertheless, he was forced to cancel his booking with this company and make new arrangements with the Mesopotamia Persia Corporation, which charged £6 per person instead of the £3 charged by Shaban Transport Co. He claimed that a pilgrim would save a lot of money by making the necessary reservations himself, and commented: 'This is the heavy burden on Hajis travelling by this route.'[128] In addition to highlighting the high fares charged by the Mesopotamia Persia Corporation, his testimony also reveals the shortcomings of the combined ticket system for the entire journey. In fact, the combined ticket provided by the Mesopotamia Persia Corporation had to be exchanged for a proper transport ticket, en route, with each of their agents in Damascus, Haifa, Suez and Jeddah. 'We had to go to all these firms to change our tickets, and each of them took a good commission.'[129]

Most of the complaints compiled by the Hajj Inquiry Committee, the Protector of British Indian Pilgrims in Baghdad and the British Legation in Jeddah were made by wealthy pilgrims. The interwar period witnessed an increase in the number of well-off hajj pilgrims, who considered their journey to Mecca to be a form of religious tourism, involving both a desire to discover the world and a demand for comfort. The French and British authorities were receptive to this development and sought to accommodate these special pilgrims by granting them certain privileges.[130] As the Protector of British Indian Pilgrims in Baghdad pointed out in 1929, well-to-do pilgrims complained about the deposit and return ticket requirements, as they 'did not understand why they should be subjected to more stringent regulations than ordinary first-class travellers crossing the desert'.[131] That year, when a group of twenty-nine pilgrims comprising wealthy Bombay merchants refused to make the compulsory deposit, the British consul agreed to exempt them from this formality, considering that they would probably be able to cover their expenses on their way to the Hijaz.[132] Also in 1929, Mohammad Ismail Sahib, secretary of the

[128] BL, IOR/L/PJ/7/771, File 2283, Extract from a written statement by Hussain Vali Mohammed Ladhiwalla, attached to a letter from the Secretariat of the High Commissioner for Iraq to the Ministry of Interior, Baghdad, 9 December 1929.
[129] Ibid.
[130] Luc Chantre, *Pèlerinages d'empire*, pp. 279–287.
[131] TNA, CO 730/159/2, Report for 1929 on the Work of the Protector of British Indian Pilgrims attached to a letter from Empson (consular secretary, High Commission for Iraq), Baghdad, 12 August 1930.
[132] TNA, CO 732/39/9, Empson to the Political Secretary to the Government of India, Baghdad, 21 March 1929.

Young Muslim Association in Karachi, had a similar experience, as he testified before the Hajj Inquiry Committee.

> I took an ordinary passport as far as Baghdad. I should have been made to deposit Rs. 400/- for four of us. But the British consul got me out of this by means of a guarantee. We had to purchase return tickets through from Baghdad to Jeddah and Jeddah to Karachi. We booked First Class all the way. We had one servant in the third class. I do not remember how much we had to pay.[133]

According to a British economic report, the hardships endured by various Indian pilgrims in 1929 affected their numbers the following year: 'Last year there were about 170 Indians so that there has been a slight decrease in the traffic from India due no doubt to the stories of restrictions and hardships suffered which were circulated by pilgrims on [their] return home.'[134] The Protector of British Indian Pilgrims was also of the opinion that the drop in the number of Indian pilgrims using the Syrian route between 1930 and 1931 was partly due to 'the somewhat lurid description of the hardships and difficulties involved which seem to have been circulated in India by those who took this route in 1929'. The economic crisis and the relatively high cost of this route was also a consideration.[135]

While wealthy pilgrims were mostly affected by the cumbersome formalities on their journey between Baghdad and Damascus, pilgrims from a lower socio-economic class could endure a much harsher experience during the transdesert journey. Crossing the Syrian Desert was indeed a dangerous venture for pilgrims travelling with few resources, as the transport companies provided them with only a minimal service during peak periods: 'light lorries carry in times of pressure as many third class passengers (pilgrim type) as can be crammed into them', reported the British Inspector General of Health in Baghdad in 1927.[136] Trucks packed with pilgrims traveling through the desert were an iconic image in the accounts of foreign and local travellers in the interwar years,[137] and especially in the writings of the British writer, Freya Stark, who was astounded by these buses filled to the brim with pilgrims.[138] In 1929, in his first report on the pilgrimage of Indians to and through Iraq, the Protector of British Indian Pilgrims

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[133] BL, IOR/L/PJ/7/771, File 4330, Testimony of Mohammad Ismail Sahib before the Hajj Inquiry Committee, Karachi, 12 August 1929.
[134] BL, IOR/L/E/7/1558, File 162, Extract from an economic report sent to Government of India on 9 July 1930.
[135] BL, IOR/L/E/7/1558, File 162, Report of the Protector of British Indian Pilgrims for 1930 and 1931, p. 13.
[136] LON, R981/12B/49616/61055, Hallinan (Inspector General of Health) to Major Thomson (President of the Quarantine Board of Egypt), Baghdad, 18 August 1927.
[137] Roland Dorgelès, *La Caravane sans Chameaux* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1928), p. 125; Firmin Duguet, *Le pèlerinage à La Mecque au point de vue religieux, social et sanitaire* (Paris: Rieder, 1932), p. 61; Ameen Rihani, *Qalb al-ʿIraq* (Beirut: Ṣader, 1935), p. 65.
[138] Freya Stark: *Beyond Euphrates: Autobiography 1928–1933* (London: Murray, 1951), letter to Robert Stark, Zia Hotel, Baghdad, 26 October 1929; Freya Stark, *Baghdad Sketches* (London: Murray, 1937), pp. 1–2.

in Baghdad pointed out that the strong dependence of pilgrims travelling through Iran and Syria on motorised transport placed them at the mercy of transport contractors. 'The pilgrims', he wrote, 'being usually ignorant of conditions in Iraq, are an easy prey to the unscrupulous in spite of the considerable measure of Government control.'[139]

Pilgrims' travel conditions also attracted the attention of the French and British authorities at the turn of the 1930s. At the Desert Traffic Control Conference, representatives of the two Mandate powers acknowledged the difficult conditions under which less fortunate pilgrims travelled. Major Cones even noted that overcrowding on buses had caused the death of a pilgrim at Ramadi.[140] 'For the crossing', the French minutes recorded, 'pilgrims very often use trucks in which they are loaded in large numbers and deprived not only of every comfort but also placed in the most inadequate sanitary and security conditions.' The delegates felt that it was impossible to demand the same conditions of comfort for the pilgrims as for other travellers, especially with regard to the prohibition of the transport of passengers and goods on the same vehicles. They nevertheless agreed on the need to avoid the overloading of lorries by establishing a maximum number of pilgrims per type of vehicle.[141] The French and British draft regulations prepared in 1931 provided the officers tasked with inspecting cars with the power to prevent any car from crossing the desert if they considered it to be inadequate for the journey or overloaded. Moreover, the regulations stipulated that the maximum number of passengers and the weight of goods that a car could carry must be inscribed on either side of every vehicle. The British draft further specified that the same regulations would apply to lorries carrying pilgrims. Finally, both drafts required that each car must carry sufficient water, food and fuel for a period of seven days.[142]

Although it is not clear from the sources when and how these regulations were implemented, the various annual reports of the Protector of British Indian Pilgrims suggest that travel conditions for pilgrims improved somewhat during the 1930s. The report for the years 1930 and 1931 noted 'a marked improvement in the treatment of pilgrims at the hands of the motor transport companies in Iraq' and stated that only a few complaints had been received in the previous two years. Furthermore, the Protector now made it a practice of recommending to

[139] TNA, CO 730/159/2, Report for 1929 on the Work of the Protector of British Indian Pilgrims.
[140] TNA, FO 371/13745, Note on the Informal Discussions Preliminary to the Iraqi-Syrian Overland Route Conference, Damascus, 9 November 1929.
[141] CADN, 1SL/1/V/703, 'Note relative à la Conférence Syro-Irakienne des 22 et 23 Janvier 1930 sur le contrôle du Trafic de la route Damas-Bagdad' as well as the minutes of the 'Conférence Syro-Irakienne sur le contrôle du Trafic de la route Damas-Bagdad'.
[142] TNA, FO 371/15281, 'Contrôle du trafic transdésertique: Avant-projet de règlement identique', Damascus, 14 April 1931 as well as 'Draft Notification under the Motor Vehicles (Traveling Passes) Law-1924' attached to a letter from British Consul Hole to the French delegate in Damascus, 16 December 1931.

pilgrims setting off for the desert journey 'only companies favourably reported upon by pilgrims returning from Syria and Palestine'. [143] A similar trend was noted in subsequent reports, which stated that the different companies had improved their transport services as regards comfort and speed and that only minor complaints had been made by pilgrims.[144] The positive outlook of these reports should not, however, obscure the difficult conditions in which the less fortunate pilgrims travelled. In August 1935, the Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs informed the French diplomatic representative in Baghdad that a car belonging to a Syrian company had travelled from Damascus to Baghdad, overpacked with travellers, and had been subsequently delayed in the desert. They requested that the Syrian authorities take all measures to prevent further incidents of this kind.[145]

The integration of the Baghdad–Damascus route into transregional mobility networks was neither a self-evident nor a seamless process. The movement of hajj pilgrims through Iraq and Syria periodically disrupted the transport market through its effect on fares. Conversely, pilgrims choosing the overland route were subject to restrictive regulations and, for the less fortunate, to very poor travel conditions. Moreover, the potential traffic inputs of long-distance movements required that transport companies make certain adjustments relating to fares, vehicles and schedules. Although these long-distance movements offered commercial opportunities for transport companies, they entailed certain risks: a change in the timetable of connecting transport services or a drop in the volume of pilgrims due to external causes could prove detrimental for the companies that relied on such traffic. This issue recurs in the following section, which demonstrates that transregional connections proved to be transient, as further rerouting of traffic was always a possibility.

Bypassing the Syrian Desert

Although the Baghdad–Damascus route emerged as an international transit route during the inter-war period, its status as a global crossroads was jeopardised in the 1930s. The development of alternative overland routes that bypassed the Syrian Desert to the north and south—unlike the Baghdad–Haifa route discussed in Chapter 3—threatened to divert part of the transregional mobility of tourists, pilgrims and travellers away from the Baghdad–

[143] BL, IOR/L/E/7/1558, File 162, Report for 1930 and 1931 on the Work of the Protector of British Indian Pilgrims attached to the Secretariat of His Excellency, the High Commissioner at Baghdad, p. 13.
[144] See the Reports on the Work of the Protector of British Indian Pilgrims for 1932, 1934 and 1935: BL, IOR/L/E/7/1558, File 162; TNA, FO 624/3/12; TNA, FO 624/7/368.
[145] CADC, 50CPCOM460, the Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the French consulate in Baghdad, 26 August 1935.

Damascus route. This final section traces these developments and their impacts on the transdesert sector.

The Baghdad Railway: A combined bus and train route

Since 1883, the *Compagnie international des Wagons-Lits* had been operating the Orient Express, a luxury train service between Paris and Varna on the Black Sea, which by the late 1880s had reached Istanbul. In the wake of the First World War, the railway line, which benefited from the inauguration in 1906 of the Simplon Tunnel, was reoriented to a more southerly route. In the late nineteenth century, the Ottoman state also launched a railway project, which would link Istanbul to Baghdad, and awarded the concession to a German company, which began work in 1903. The famous Berlin-to-Baghdad Railway was aimed at achieving an uninterrupted connection between Europe and the Persian Gulf. By the end of the First World War, the line had been completed up to Aleppo and further north to Nusaybin in Turkey.[146] The new rail route from Istanbul to Aleppo enabled an extension of the Simplon-Orient Express service to Syria. As Amit Bein has shown, the Turkish government was keen to capitalise on this railway, hoping that 'a growing number of travelers between Europe, the Middle East, and India [would] ride the train through its territory, make stopovers in its cities, and make significant economic contributions to Turkey's economy'.[147] In 1927, the Wagon Lits Company launched a service between Istanbul, Aleppo and Tripoli, known as the Taurus Express. At the time, however, most travellers arriving in Aleppo from Europe continued by car or train to Beirut and Damascus, from where they travelled across the Syrian Desert to Baghdad.[148]

By the end of the 1920s, the Baghdad–Damascus route had been integrated with sea routes (via the ports of Lebanon, Palestine and Egypt) and overland routes (via the Simplon–

[146] Michael E. Bonine, 'The Introduction of Railroads in the Eastern Mediterranean: Economic and Social Impacts', in Thomas Philipp and Birgit Schäbler (eds.), *The Syrian Land: Processes of Integration and Fragmentation : Bilād Al-Shām from the 18th to the 20th Century* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1998), pp. 57–58; Peter H. Christensen, *Germany and the Ottoman Railways: Art, Empire, and Infrastructure*, (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2017), pp. 10–24; Guillemette Crouzet, *Genèses du Moyen-Orient: Le Golfe Persique à l'âge des impérialismes (vers 1800-vers 1914)*, Chapter 6; Sean McMeekin, *The Berlin-Baghdad Express: The Ottoman Empire and Germany's Bid for World Power* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), pp. 32–53; Matthieu Rey, 'Drawing a Line in the Sand? Another (Hi)Story of Borders', in Matthieu Cimino (ed)., *Syria: Borders, Boundaries, and the State* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), p. 38.

[147] Amit Bein, *Kemalist Turkey and the Middle East: International Relations in the Interwar Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 205–206.

[148] See the example of the Iraqi Minister, Yusuf Ghanima, in César Jaquier, 'Beyond Sea and Desert: Journeying Between London and Baghdad in the Interwar Years', in Anna Bundt and Leon Julius Biela (eds.), *Interwar Crossroads: Entangled Histories of the Middle Eastern and North Atlantic World between the World Wars* (Bielefeld: transcript, forthcoming in 2022).

Orient Express and the Taurus Express), which travellers chose according to their time, finances or preferences. In her autobiography, the British writer Agatha Christie highlighted the coexistence of both routes between Europe and the Middle East. On her first trip to Iraq in 1928, she shared a cabin on the train from London to Trieste with a woman who was also going to Baghdad but intended to take the ship from Trieste to Beirut:

> She said, "I suppose you are going to Trieste, and will take a boat there on to Beirut?" I said no, I was going the whole way through by the Orient Express. She shook her head a bit over that. "I don't think that's advisable, you know. I don't think you would like it. Oh well, I suppose it can't be helped now. Anyway, we shall meet, I expect."[149]

Amusingly, although Agatha Christie took time out to do some sightseeing on the way, she met up with the same woman once in Damascus, with whom she shared the Nairn bus to Baghdad.[150]

During the 1930s, however, the expansion of railway networks in northern Syria and Iraq gradually opened up a new route between the two countries, albeit not without resistance. In the spring of 1928, Mr Ramsay Tainsh, Director of the Iraqi Railways, sent a representative to Syria, who reported that there was a strong demand within business circles for a connection between the Syrian and Iraqi railways (via the section that penetrated Turkish territory). This situation convinced Ramsay Tainsh to establish a motorised transport service that would bridge the two railway networks before a Syrian contractor did so. The same year, he travelled to London and met with a representative of the Simplon–Orient Express to discuss possible ways of developing tourism in Iraq. 'The advantage of getting tourists to enter Iraq at Mosul', he wrote, 'is that their stay will be longer and they will spend more money and will travel by the 200-mile section of Railway to Baghdad, now unused by tourists.'[151] Promoting the new rail route between Europe and Iraq for Europeans was a way to bring more traffic to the Iraqi Railways. In more concrete terms, the two men discussed the modalities of a bus service that would link the railheads of the Syrian and Iraqi rail networks.[152]

Although the Iraqi Railways opted for a motorised service between the railheads, they were still opposed to extending the Iraqi line and connecting it directly to the Syrian network. Both the Colonial Office and the Iraqi Railways—which was still controlled by British shareholders[153]—were of the opinion that the linking of the two networks was inevitable in the

[149] Agatha Christie, *An Autobiography* (Toronto: Harper Collins, 2010), p. 995.
[150] Ibid., p. 1,014.
[151] TNA, AIR 2/1023, Memorandum by Ramsay Tainsh (Director, Iraq Railways) on 'Trade and Tourist Route from Nisibin to Mosul', place unknown, 7 November 1928.
[152] Ibid.
[153] The transfer of ownership of the railway network to the Iraqi state took place in 1936. Shereen Khairallah, 'Railway Networks of the Middle East to 1948', *The Syrian Land*, p. 92

long run but that there was much to be gained by slowing down its completion. As Mr Tainsh stated in July 1928, the Iraqi Railways first wanted to establish a railway connection between Kirkuk and Mosul in order to initiate this commercial route 'firmly enough to cope with the subsequent competition by the Alexandretta-Nisibin-Mosul route'.[154] Railway politics was deeply concerned with gaining first access to the markets of northern Iraq. The Turkish government's efforts to encourage the development of a rail route to Iraq and Iran raised the Iraqi government's fear that Turkey would capture these markets.[155] Against this backdrop, the introduction of a bus service to fill the gaps of the rail networks had the advantage of facilitating the movements of tourists and travellers on the northern route without creating a commercial flow.

A delegation of the Iraqi Railways explored the route in early January 1930 and a car service was initiated on 15 February.[156] Passengers of the Taurus Express arriving from Turkey continued their journey by train, entering Turkey again for about 100 kilometres before reaching the terminus of Nusaybin and then walking to Qamishli, just across the Turkish–Syrian border. From there, they were transferred to buses operated by the Iraqi Railways (Figure 18), which took them to Mosul in Iraq. The next morning, they continued the journey by bus to Kirkuk, where they boarded the train. The late 1920s thus witnessed the 'inauguration of a rail-bus service from Europe to Iraq along the path of the former Baghdad railway'.[157] The journey from Paris to Aleppo now took four and a half days; from Paris to Nissibin five and a half days; and from Paris to Baghdad eight days. The route was also of some interest to tourists. In Mosul, travellers enjoyed good accommodation and could spend the afternoon exploring the city and even visiting the nearby ruins of Nineveh, which was about a ten-minute drive from the centre of Mosul.[158] From March 1932, in cooperation with the Iraqi Railways, the Wagons-Lits Company established a car service between Khanaqin and Tehran, with the aim of developing

[154] TNA, AIR 2/1023, High Commissioner Dobbs to the Secretary of States for the Colonies, Baghdad, 5 July 1928, as well as the Colonial Office to Air Commodore, London, 12 June 1929, transmitting a document that summarised recent developments concerning the connection of the Syrian and Iraqi railway networks.
[155] Amit Bein, *Kemalist Turkey and the Middle East: International Relations in the Interwar Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 123–128.
[156] CADN, 1SL/1/V/704, Lieutenant Dillerman (*Service des Renseignements*) to the counterpart service in Deir ez-Zor, Kamechlie, 11 January 1930.
[157] Morton B. Stratton, 'British Railways and Motor Roads in the Middle East, 1930–1940', p. 189.
[158] C. Dalrymple Belgrave, 'The Overland Route to the Persian Gulf', *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society* 18:4 (1931), p. 561; CADN, 1SL/1/V/704, Note by Le Guiner (French Inspector, Customs Service), Aleppo, 21 February 1930; TNA, AIR 2/1023, British Consul Monck-Mason to Henderson, Aleppo, 20 November 1930; LON, R2308/6A/20070/536, French Report to the League of Nations on the Administration of Syria and Lebanon, p. 26. For details on Nineveh as a tourist site, see *Nineveh & Khorsabad: a Note on the Ruins for Visitors* (Baghdad: Government Press, 1943); Marcel Monmarché, *Syrie-Palestine-Iraq-Transjordanie* (Paris: Hachette, 1932), pp. 465–466.

tourist traffic extending into Iran. Travellers no longer slept in Mosul but continued to Kirkuk, where they boarded a sleeper train that arrived in Khanaqin in the morning. From there, a company run by a certain Graham Page transported the travellers to Tehran in four-seater cars. The announced schedule promised travellers a journey from London to Tehran completed in nine days and eight hours, combining two stages by train and two stages by car.[159]

FIGURE 18: A BUS RUN BY THE IRAQI RAILWAYS, 1938

Image credit: From the American Geographical Society Library (AGSL), University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee Libraries. Frederick G. Clapp Collection, 'Iraq, Rys Company Bus on Route from Kirkūk to Al-Mawṣil, 1938.' (Courtesy of the AGSL).

In 1932, the railway line was extended from Nusaybin to Tell Ziwan in Syrian territory, before the works advanced further east, thus reducing the length of the section run by buses. Mosul notables and merchants strongly advocated the linking up of the Syrian and Iraqi railway networks, which they believed would have a very positive effect on the city's economic situation. In March 1934, the French consul in Mosul reported that the local press supported French work to extend the railway line eastwards, arguing that the junction of the Syrian and Iraqi networks would give the city a major role as a transit hub between Syria and Persia.[160] According to the American Legation in Baghdad as well, the connection of the two railway networks was one of the main demands of the population of Mosul. Several petitions, relayed

[159] TNA, FO 371/16010, Circular Letter No. 20, *Compagnie International des Wagons-Lits et des Grands Express Européens*, Paris, 2 March 1932; British Consul Monck-Mason to the Foreign Office, Aleppo, 31 March 1932; TNA, FO 371/16010, British Consul Hoare to Sir John Simon, Tehran, 26 April 1932.
[160] CADC, 50CPCOM580, French consul to the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mosul, 6 March 1934.

in various Iraqi newspapers, were sent to King Ghazi to draw his attention to the urgency of this request. The Mufti of Mosul also led the campaign for Mosul to be linked to the Syrian railway network.[161] On 3 January 1935, the Baghdad newspaper *Al-Bilad* published copies of several letters sent by the Mosul Chamber of Commerce to the Iraqi Ministers of Economy and Communication, Finance and Customs. Mosul traders stressed that the city's isolation from the surrounding areas was greatly affecting its economy. They called for the extension of the line to the Syrian border and, in the meantime, demanded the paving of the road to facilitate the movement of cars.[162]

The French completed the extension of the railway line up to Tell Kotchek on the Syrian–Iraqi border in May 1935.[163] In the following years, the Iraqi government—which became the owner of the Iraqi Railways in April 1936—undertook to extend the railway line from Baiji, north of Baghdad, to Mosul.[164] In January 1939, *Le Commerce du Levant* published an interview with a representative of the Wagons-Lits Company, announcing that the two railway networks would be connected starting from March 1940, which would make direct travel (without transfers) from London to Baghdad by train possible. According to the newspaper, this was proof that the railway was not an outdated mode of transport.[165] Work on the remaining sections was completed the following year, and the first train travelled all the way from Istanbul to Baghdad on 17 July 1940.[166]

During the 1930s, this new route gained popularity with travellers, especially as the section covered by buses became shorter. In 1930, the French report to the League of Nations noted that travellers from Iraq and India were showing increasing interest in using this route instead of the Baghdad–Damascus route.[167] In the following years, the number of passengers taking the rail and bus route increased, albeit irregularly. There were 810 passengers travelling through Mosul in both directions in 1930, 921 in 1931, and 628 in 1932.[168] Their numbers

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[161] NARA, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Asia, 1910–1929, microfilm roll 18, File 890G.00, U.S. Legation in Baghdad, press review with comments, 1 to 15 June 1934. See also CADN, 1SL/1/V/706, excerpts from *Al-Ikha al-Watani* No. 674, 26 June 1934 and from *Fata al-Iraq* No. 69, 27 October 1934; CADN, 1SL/1/V/706, 'Déclarations faites au cours de plusieurs entretiens par Habi Effendi El-Obeidi, Mufti de Mossoul' attached to a despatch from the French consulate in Mosul to the French High Commissioner, 19 November 1934.

[162] AUB, 'Maṭālib al-Mawṣul fī iqtiṣād al-bilād wa 'umrānihā', *Al-Bilad*, 3 January 1935, p. 4.

[163] TNA, FO 684/8, British Consul Havard to the Foreign Office, Beirut, 8 May 1935.

[164] Philip Willard Ireland, 'Berlin to Baghdad Up-to-Date', *Foreign Affairs* 19:3 (April 1941), p. 667.

[165] AUB, 'La liaison ferroviaire de l'Orient avec l'Occident', *Le Commerce du Levant*, 29 January 1939, p. 1.

[166] Morton B. Stratton, 'British Railways and Motor Roads in the Middle East, 1930–1940', *Economic Geography* 29:3 (1944), p. 202.

[167] LON, R2308/6A/20070/536, French Report to the League of Nations on the Administration of Syria and Lebanon for 1929, p. 26.

[168] CADN, 1SL/1/V/703, Statistics for travellers who used the Simplon Express route between Tel Ziwan and Iraq between 1930 and 1932, attached to a letter from the French consulate in Iraq dated 31 December 1933.

continued to grow slowly until the outbreak of the Second World War.[169] The extension of the line between Tell Kotchek and Mosul thus strengthened connections between Iraq and Syria and prompted the Iraqi government to open a consulate in Aleppo in mid-1939.[170] The overland transcontinental route between Europe and Iraq was advertised in travel guides and tourism brochures as an alternative route to the Damascus–Baghdad route.[171] The Iraqi Railways began offering special fares to travellers bound for Europe via Mosul, Aleppo and the Taurus/Simplon–Orient Express during the 'leave season' from June to October. A 1935 leaflet written in Arabic and English also promoted the journey from 'Basra to London in seven days' for British administrators as well as Iraqis wishing to travel to Britain during the summer.[172] Finally, this route was promoted for those travelling from India to Europe: 'By using this new route the traveller not only avoids the Red Sea with its moist and trying heat, but has the opportunity of visiting such places of world renown as Ur of the Chaldees, Babylon, Nineveh, etc., with little or no extra expense, since these sites lie on the main railway route.'[173]

Whereas the car undoubtedly competed with the train on certain stretches, it also bridged unconnected rail networks. The development of the rail route between Aleppo and Baghdad in the 1930s highlights the role of motorised transport in the completion of the long-pending Baghdad Railway project, as it enabled passengers to use the line and thus bring in revenue for the railway companies before the completion of the entire network. The rail route through northern Syria did not overtake the Baghdad–Damascus route, which continued to experience high levels of traffic in the late 1930s, but it nevertheless provided an alternative route for European travellers and tourists travelling to Iraq and further afield to Iran and India.[174] However, the development of this route somewhat shifted the centre of gravity of the global crossroads to the north, facilitating Mosul's integration into transregional mobility networks,

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[169] LON, R2308/6A/20070/536, French Report to the League of Nations on the Administration of Syria and Lebanon for 1929, p. 26; TNA, FO 684/7/34/3, Mackereth (British consul, Damascus), 26 April 1934; AUB, 'Le trafic entre Alep et Mossoul, *Le Commerce du Levant*, 20 August 1935, p. 2; CADN, 1SL/1/V/697, 'Prolongement du Chemin de fer de Bagdad', Contrôle des Sociétés Concessionnaires et Travaux Publics, 15 July 1938.

[170] BL, IOR/L/PS/12/2891, Coll 17/29 Iraq. Relations with Syria, Davies (British consulate, Aleppo) to Foreign Affairs, London, 20 July 1939.

[171] Louis Roux-Servine, *Sur les routes du Levant: Petit manuel du voyage expérimental* (Paris: J. Barreau, 1934); TCA, Thomas Cook & Son, *How to See Baghdad*, 1936, p. 10.

[172] CADN, 1SL/1/V/636, 'Basra to London in Seven Days: Baghdad to London in Six Days', a leaflet produced by the Iraqi Railways, May 1935. See also Sa'id Himadeh, *Al-Niẓām al-iqtiṣādī fī al-'Irāq* (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1938), p. 306.

[173] CADN, 1SL/1/V/636, 'Europe and the Far East via Iraq: Guide to Iraq' produced by the Iraqi Railways [date unknown], p. 23. See also Richard Thoumin, *Géographie humaine de la Syrie centrale* (Paris: Leroux, 1936), p. 203.

[174] CADN, 1SL/1/V/702, Monthly statistics on transdesert traffic, *Sûreté Générale*, Beirut. In July 1938, the Nairn Transport Company was confident that the railway connection would not affect them: TCA, Black Box 32, Memorandum based on an interview with Fraser (Nairn Transport Company), Thomas Cook & Son, London, Berkeley Street, 11 July 1938.

much to the relief of many of its inhabitants, especially the merchants. In the 1930s, the development of another route bypassing the Syrian Desert had more serious consequences for the transdesert transport business, weakening the transregional connections of the Baghdad–Damascus route on which many companies relied.

The Baghdad–Medina pilgrimage route

In the 1930s, various initiatives, motivated by economic and political considerations, were aimed at developing new and exclusively overland pilgrimage routes to the Hijaz. The successful opening of the Baghdad–Medina route from 1935 captured a large proportion of the Iraqi and Central Asian pilgrims who would have otherwise travelled on the Baghdad–Damascus route. In turn, this development prompted the efforts of a group of entrepreneurs, notables and clerics in Syria seeking to forge an alternative route from Damascus to Medina. An exploratory expedition organised in April 1935, although largely unsuccessful, testifies to the dependence of the transport companies operating between Baghdad and Damascus on the transport of pilgrims. The entrepreneurs, merchants and intellectuals involved in the expedition attempted to cope with shifts in transregional movements, in this case the diversion of pilgrim traffic. Taken together, both of these projects seeking to establish new pilgrimage routes reveal that the integration of the Baghdad–Damascus route into transregional mobility networks was not a directional and progressive process; rather, it was one characterised by advances as well as setbacks, and even reversals.

As early as 1932, Iraqi and Saudi officials considered reopening the Darb Zubayda route, which linked Iraq almost directly to the Hijaz, and which had been used by pilgrims in the distant past.[175] Discussions continued between 1932 and 1933, with the governments finally agreeing on the following route: Baghdad–Najaf–Hail–Medina.[176] The newly independent government of Iraq saw this venture as an opportunity to break away from French and British control over the pilgrimage—notably by escaping the monopoly of the British Khedivial Mail Line in the Mediterranean—and to develop a privileged relationship with another regional power. In 1934, an Iraqi–Saudi commission was established to explore the route and resolve organisational issues relating to transport, security, supplies and health controls. The official

[175] For information on Darb Zubayda during the Abbasid period, see Francis E. Peters, *The Hajj: The Muslim Pilgrimage to Mecca and the Holy Places* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 69–79.
[176] TNA, CO 732/53/7, Hijaz/Najd Ministry for Foreign Affairs to the Iraq Ministry for Foreign Affairs, place unknown, 19 January 1932; the Iraq Ministry of Interior to the Ministry of Economic and Communications, Baghdad, 29 February 1932; BL, IOR/L/E/7/1558 – File 162, Report on 'Iraq-Hejaz Motor Route for Pilgrims' with [a] Sketch Map of the Route, 19 January 1933; AUB, 'Nouvelles de l'Irak', *Le commerce du Levant*, 22 March 1933, p. 1.

inauguration took place the following year. The Iraqi authorities selected two transport companies, the ‘Abd al-‘Aziz al-Rafi‘i Company and the ‘Abud Shallash Company, which were asked to accept similar rules to those governing traffic between Iraq and Syria: travelling in convoys and under escort and having sufficient supplies of water and fuel.[177] The first convoys of pilgrims were transported by Iraqi companies from Baghdad to Medina, before being transferred to the cars of Saudi companies for the onward journey to Mecca. They completed the entire journey in three or four days.[178]

About 400 pilgrims travelled by car from Najaf to Medina during the hajj of 1935. Among them were 26 Indian pilgrims, with 68 others opting for the Damascus route.[179] Although the number of pilgrims was relatively low because of the late opening of the route, approximately 2,000 people used it for the hajj of 1936, thus firmly establishing this new pilgrimage route.[180] That year, the Iraqi government stopped publishing information about the Syrian route, only promoting the Najaf–Medina route.[181] The development of the Najaf–Medina route diverted a large portion of the pilgrim traffic from Central Asia and India away from the French mandated territories. In 1936, the French noted a drastic fall in the number of pilgrims transiting via the port of Beirut.[182] The decrease was also due to the fact that many Lebanese and Syrian pilgrims took the opportunity to avoid the sea route. As the Syrian newspaper, *Al-Sha‘b,* reported on 17 January 1935, a large group of pilgrims met in Damascus to discuss the comparative benefits of the sea route via Beirut and the overland route via Najaf. They eventually agreed that the journey through Iraq would not only be easier but also much cheaper.[183]

The appeal of the Baghdad–Medina route can be attributed to the conjunction of several factors. First of all, the French management of the pilgrimage had alienated large sections of the Lebanese and Syrian populations. From the late 1920s onwards, the obligation to embark in Beirut and travel by sea through a concessionary company raised protests. In 1934, the

[177] TNA, FO 624/3/29, extract from *The Iraq Times*, 15 February 1935; AUB, ‘Ḥujjāj bayt Allah al-ḥarām’, *Al-Bilad*, 17 February 1935, p. 2; ‘Qaḍiyyat naql al-ḥujjāj’, *Al-Bilad*, p. 4. On traffic regulations, see TNA, FO 624/3/29, the Iraqi Ministry for Foreign Affairs to the British Embassy, Baghdad, 6 March 1935; the British Ambassador to the Foreign Office, Baghdad, 27 February 1935.
[178] Sylvia Chiffoleau, *Le Voyage à La Mecque*, pp. 252–254.
[179] TNA, FO 624/3/29, the British Embassy to the Foreign Office, Baghdad, 25 April 1935; TNA, FO 624/7/368, Report on the Work of the Indian Section of the British Consulate in Baghdad for the Year 1935, p. 14.
[180] Luc Chantre, *Pèlerinages d’empire*, pp. 269–271.
[181] TNA, FO 624/9/332, Report on the Work of the Indian Section of the British Consulate in Baghdad for the Year 1936, pp. 14–15.
[182] Luc Chantre, ‘Se rendre à La Mecque sous la Troisième République’, *Cahiers de la Méditerranée* No. 78 (2009), p. 13.
[183] AUB, ‘Al-ḥujjāj yaqra’ūn al-safar bi-ṭarīq al-birr’, *Al-Sha‘b*, 17 January 1935, p. 2. See also TNA, FO 684/8/112/14, extract from *Les Échos*, 19 January 1935.

French decided to replace the annual tender by granting a ten-year concession to the Lebanese Christian shipowner, Farid Eddé, to transport pilgrims from Beirut. This decision triggered strong opposition in Lebanon and Syria both in nationalist and Muslim circles.[184] It also drew much criticism in Iraq and, according to the French consul in Baghdad, revived public interest in the 'ancient trails of Islam, which [had] been abandoned for a long time from a commercial point of view'.[185] In addition, the failure to rehabilitate the Hijaz Railway was also an influencing factor. Despite widespread demand for the restoration of the railway sections damaged and destroyed during the war, the territorial reconfiguration of the post-war period brought these projects to a halt. In 1928, a conference was held in Haifa between representatives of Syria, Palestine, Transjordan and the Hijaz to discuss the rehabilitation of the line. However, the discussions stalled over the issue of ownership. This question was taken up again at the World Islamic Congress held in Jerusalem in December 1931. Finally, another conference was held in Haifa in 1935, but this time the delegates could not agree on the distribution of the expenses incurred for the restoration of the line.[186] Ultimately, the reorganisation of the pilgrimage routes occurred in a context of growing tensions in Syria and Lebanon, marked by numerous demonstrations and strikes organised under the patronage of the Bloc National. These events were organised to protest against the French economic policy of monopolies (e.g., those of the tobacco and tramway companies and the Auto-Routière du Levant) and the lack of tariff protection against foreign products. The negotiations on the Franco–Syrian treaty also led to heightened tension between the Mandate authorities and the population.[187]

These developments set the scene for the organisation of an expedition to explore an overland route between Damascus and Medina in 1935 as a reaction to the opening of the Baghdad–Najaf–Medina route. Through an examination of various primary sources—French and British Mandate archives, press accounts of the expedition, and the narrative and memoirs

[184] Luc Chantre, *Pèlerinages d'empire*, pp. 301–303; Sylvia Chiffoleau, *Le Voyage à La Mecque*, pp. 353–355.
[185] CADN, 1SL/1/V/664, Paul Lépissier to the French High Commissioner, Baghdad, 31 December 1934
[186] Luc Chantre, *Pèlerinages d'empire*, pp. 264–265; Nicholas E. Roberts, 'Making Jerusalem the Centre of the Muslim World: Pan-Islam and the World Islamic Congress of 1931', *Contemporary Levant* 4:1 (2019), pp. 52–63; René Tresse, *Le Pèlerinage syrien aux villes saintes de l'Islam* (Paris: Imprimerie Chaumette, 1937), chapter 7. For the Arabic communiqué of the Committee for the Defence of the Hijaz Railway signed in Damascus on 31 October 1931, see FO 684/5/31/1539, Bayān lajnat al-difā' 'an al-khaṭṭ al-ḥadīdī al-ḥijāzī.
[187] Carla Eddé, 'La mobilisation populaire à Beyrouth à l'époque du Mandat (1918–1943): l'apprentissage progressif de la participation' in Nadine Méouchy and Peter Sluglett (eds.), *The British and French Mandates in Comparative Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), pp. 623–648; Simon Jackson, 'Mandatory Development: The Political Economy of the French Mandate in Syria and Lebanon, 1915–1939' (PhD thesis, New York University, 2009); Philip S. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920–1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 327–481.

of one of the participants—the following section examines the origin, course and aftermath of this failed expedition.

The expedition from Damascus to Medina

On 31 March and 2 April 1935, respectively, two convoys of cars left Damascus, carrying merchants, religious and intellectual figures, as well as transport contractors, with a view to exploring a direct route to Medina via Transjordan. The expedition was made possible by the participation of the main Syrian and Iraqi transport companies that operated between Baghdad and Damascus at the time. These were the five companies that would merge, two months later, to form the *Sociétés Réunies de Transports Transdésertiques*, as discussed in Chapter 3. For them, the 1935 expedition was a direct response to the opening of the Najaf–Medina route, which threatened to divert many pilgrims away from the transdesert route. In addition to the local companies, the expedition brought together several merchants from Damascus who were keen to develop trading partnerships in the Hijaz, as well as various intellectual figures who saw the expedition as a means of strengthening ties within the Arab-Islamic world. In other words, the expedition combined economic, religious and political interests.

As early as 1932, when the Iraqi and Saudi authorities were discussing the opening of a direct pilgrimage route between Iraq and the Hijaz, similar projects were taking shape in Damascus. For example, it was proposed to develop a route between Damascus, Busra al-Sham, Azraq and Jawf at a time when the Najaf–Medina route was projected to pass through Jawf as well, before the decision was made to develop a more direct route.[188] In the meantime, a commission was established in Damascus to explore the possibilities of forging an overland route to Medina via Amman and Maan.[189] The project was revived with greater force in March 1935, when the Najaf–Medina route was about to be inaugurated. At a meeting held in Damascus, participants expressed their fear that the opening of the Najaf route would be prejudicial to Syria. They felt that the only way to safeguard Syrian interests, now that the restoration of the Hijaz Railway seemed impossible, was to pave the old caravan route to enable

[188] CO 732/53/7, Extract from Summary of Intelligence, Air Staff Intelligence, 24 February 1932. It is noteworthy that already in 1930, two Syrian companies had managed to ply their cars between Damascus and Jawf, paving the way for new connections between Syria and the Najd. AUB, 'Bayna Dimashq wa Jawf, qāfilat Debosh wa Akkash', *al-Sha'b*, 30 July 1930, p. 3; 'Sayyārāt al-Jawf', *Al-Sha'b*, 31 July 1930, p. 2.
[189] AUB, 'Lajnat al-ḥujjāj', *Al-Sha'b*, 25 February 1932, p. 3.

the passage of cars. They agreed to call upon existing transport companies to create a joint company that would operate between Syria and the Hijaz.[190]

Five transport companies accepted the proposal and delegated their representatives to participate in the expedition: Mahmud Debosh (Debosh & Akkash), Abdul Hamid Seyada (representing both Sawaf & Seyada and Shaban Transport Co.), Hamdi Kudmani (Eastern National Company) as well as Ali and Jamal al-Haffar (Habbal & Co). In its correspondence written long after the expedition, on 8 June 1940, the *Sociétés Réunies* explained to the French delegate that these companies were in a difficult situation in the mid-1930s. As the hajj season provided them with a traffic flow of about 6,000 to 7,000 Iraqi and Iranian pilgrims annually, the opening of the Najaf route presented a real threat to their business. [191] This is the reason why they accepted the proposal of the Syrian merchants and notables to participate in the exploratory expedition.

All members of the expedition agreed on the main objectives, which were to explore a viable route between Damascus and Medina and to secure Ibn Saud' approval for the development of this route for conveying pilgrim and goods traffic. From the outset, however, disagreements and disputes broke out, which eventually led to the splitting of the *Sociétés Réunies* into two groups. Two committees were formed in the early spring of 1935, each of which began to organise its own convoys. One of the two committees formed around the figure of Yasin al-Rawwaf, the former Najd consul in Syria, who came from a well-established family in Damascus, members of whom used to work as guides accompanying the annual pilgrimage caravan.[192] Yasin al-Rawwaf, like Mohammad al-Bassam before him, sought to adapt to and benefit from developments in motorised transport.[193] Both of these individuals testify to the capacities of a local entrepreneurial elite to adapt to the transformations of the economy; changing trade flows in the case of al-Bassam and changing pilgrim flows in the case of al-Rawwaf. The first committee also included representatives of the transport companies, Kamel al-Bunni, a journalist from the Syrian newspaper *Al-Ayyam*, Zaki Sukkar, a member of the Damascus municipal council and 'Ali al-Tantawi, a teacher and writer, who later became known as an Islamic preacher. The second committee was composed of a number of prominent

[190] AUB, 'Ṭarīq al-qawāfil al-qadīma wa fawā'iduhu', *Al-Sha'b*, 3 March 1935, p. 2. See also Ṭarīq al-ḥajj al-barrī bayna Dimashq wa-l-Ḥijāz, *Al-Bilad*, 4 March 1935, p. 5; 'Ṭarīq al-ḥajj al-barrī', *Al-Sha'b*, 28 March 1935, p. 2.
[191] TNA, FO 684/8/112/14, Memorandum on the Damascus–Medina Route written by the first dragoman of the British consulate, Damascus, 11 June 1935; CADN, 1SL/1/V/664, *Sociétés Réunies des Transports Transdésertiques* to the delegate of the High Commissioner, Damascus, 8 June 1940.
[192] Ali al-Tantawi, *Dhikrayāt 'Alī al-Ṭanṭāwī Vol. 3* (Jeddah: Dār al-Manāra, 1986), p. 55.
[193] Apparently, Mohammad al-Bassam and Yasin al-Rawwaf were acquainted. See the photograph included in the following article by Philippe Pétriat: 'The Uneven Age of Speed: Caravans, Technology, and Mobility in the Late Ottoman and Post-Ottoman Middle East', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 53:2 (May 2015), p. 276.

merchants of Damascus like Rushdi al-Sukkari, whom the historian Philip S. Khoury described as 'one of the wealthiest provisions merchants in Damascus'.[194] The others were Sherif Nuss, who held the presidency of the group of merchants, Sayah Kassab Bashi, Fares Mahayni, Mohamed Samman, Abel Hamid Tabba', Abdallah Kokache, Zeki Katana, Adel Khoja, Beshir Ramadan, Ismail Mahayni, and Mohamed Kowatly.[195]

The tensions between the two committees were even discussed in the local press. On 2 April, an article published in *Al-Sha'b* regretted that the two committees had still not found a way of reconciling their views and unifying their actions. It called for unity and hoped that its appeal would resonate with them.[196] Likewise, the first dragoman of the British consulate in Damascus reported some dissension among members of the expedition after consulting some of them upon their return. Firstly, each group had hoped to obtain a concession from Ibn Saud to acquire monopoly of transport between Syria and the Hijaz, Secondly, each group was divided by rivalries for the presidency of the convoy. Thirdly, the group of merchants wanted to exclude 'Ali al-Tantawi from the expedition for having allegedly criticised the Tijaniyya brotherhood to which most of them belonged.[197] Thus, while the expedition was off to a bad start, it was nonetheless carried out.

'The problems and difficulties we faced were no greater than those experienced by Columbus and his comrades, but they were no less important.' With these words 'Ali al-Tantawi recalled the expedition a few decades later in his memoirs.[198] The Syrian teacher and writer kept a diary during the fifty-eight-day journey, which led him from Damascus to Medina and back in 1935. He also published various press articles in *Al-Risala* (Cairo) and *Alif Ba* (Damascus), some of which were later compiled into a book about the expedition titled *Min nafaḥāt al-ḥaram*, which offers insights into the lived experience of the expedition provided by one of its participants.[199] The first convoy left Damascus on 31 March 1935 with five cars carrying a Saudi flag and banner that read: 'the Syrian delegation to survey the overland

[194] Philip S. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, p. 133.
[195] For the names of the members of the two convoys, see TNA, FO 684/8/112/14, British report [no title], 2 April 1935; CADN, 1SL/1/V/664, Intelligence report No.225/S, *Services Spéciaux*, Damascus, 27 May 1935; TNA, FO 684/8/112/14, Memorandum on the Damascus–Medina Route by the first dragoman of the British Consulate, Damascus, 11 June 1935.
[196] AUB, 'Wafd ākhar yusāfir li-iktishāf al-ṭarīq', *Al-Sha'b*, 2 April 1935, p. 3.
[197] TNA, FO 684/8/112/14, Memorandum on the Damascus–Medina Route by the first dragoman of the British consulate, Damascus, 11 June 1935.
[198] Ali al-Tantawi*, Dhikrayāt Ali al-Tantawi*, p. 53.
[199] Ali al-Tantawi, *Min nafaḥāt al-ḥaram* (Damascus: Dār al-fikr: 1960). See also his articles 'Fī ṭarīq al-Madīna', *Al-risala*, 13 May 1935, pp. 777–779. https://archive.alsharekh.org/Articles/30/12064/236343; 'Ilā arḍ al-nubūwa', *Al-risala*, 3 June 1940, pp. 927–928, https://archive.alsharekh.org/Articles/30/12297/241116 (accessed 2 June 2022).

pilgrimage route'. The convoy left amidst the cheers of people who came to say goodbye and headed southwards for Deraa and Bosra al-Sham on the border with Transjordan. 'Ali al-Tantawi recounted that as they had not received permission from the British authorities to cross Transjordan, they decided to avoid the outpost of Al-Azraq and proceed as quickly as possible to Qarayat al-Milh in the Najd. Although they had a guide, they lost their way and finally entered Najd territory only with the help of Bedouin and a British officer posted at a pipeline station.[200] After the difficulties caused by the sandy terrain leading to Qarayat al-Milh, the rest of the journey to Tebuk alternated between sandy and mountainous stretches, being difficult and even impassable along certain stretches. In some places, the terrain almost broke the cars into pieces, as the journalist of *Al-Ayyam* reported.[201] (Figure 19) From Tebuk, the cars at times followed the old Hijaz railroad, but nevertheless got lost for two days and passed through some very difficult stretches. From Medina, a fully motorable road led to Mecca. In all, the two convoys travelled 2,465 km in seventeen days, which included around two days required to repair the vehicles and some time spent with local rulers en route, who welcomed them. On the return journey, some of the merchants travelled by sea, while the rest of the expedition took a different route (Medina–Tebuk–Moudawwara–Maan–Amman–Zarka–Mafrak–Deraa–Damascus) on the advice of Ibn Saud, which proved better and much shorter.[202]

[200] Ali al-Tantawi, *Min nafaḥāt al-ḥaram*, pp. 77–89.
[201] FO 684/8/112/14, extracts from *Al-Ayyam*, 15 May 1935.
[202] CADN, 1SL/1/V/664, 'Rapport sur le voyage au Hedjaz', transmitted by Sawaf & Siyada to the delegate of the High Commissioner, Damascus; TNA, FO 684/8/112/14, Memorandum on the Damascus–Medina Route written by the first dragoman of the British consulate, Damascus, 11 June 1935; Ali al-Tantawi, *Min nafaḥāt al-ḥaram*, pp. 128–142.

FIGURE 19: THE DELEGATION IN TEBUK

Image credit: Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes. CADN, 1SL/1/V/664, 'Rapport sur le voyage au Hedjaz'. By Sawaf & Seyada (Courtesy of the CADN).

The expedition was enthusiastically received in the Arab press. In addition to the articles in *Al-Sha'b* and *Al-Ayyam*, a particularly exuberant article was published in another Syrian newspaper, *Al-Qabas*, in May 1935: 'For the first time, cars travel overland between the Hijaz and Syria: Convenient transport is an essential condition of the Arab unity and one of the requirements for the economic life.'[203] However, the press also underscored the challenges posed by the rugged terrain in many areas.[204] In an interview for *Al-Sha'b*, Mahmud Debosh pointed out the hardships they had endured due to the sandy and rocky terrain that they had negotiated on the outbound journey. However, he was more optimistic about the route taken on the return journey.[205] At a meeting held in early June 1935, the delegates of the transport companies reaffirmed the need to establish an overland route to the Hijaz in order to prevent Syria from becoming 'isolated' and announced their determination to organise the transport of pilgrims in the near future.[206] King Ibn Saud's pledge of support given to the delegation was also an encouraging sign for the project's proponents. During an audience in Mecca, he told them that he was ready to undertake the improvement of the Medina–Damascus section of the

[203] AUB, 'Al-ṭarīq al-barrī bayna Sūriyā wa al-Ḥijāz', *Al-Qabas*, 9 May 1935, p. 2.
[204] TNA, FO 684/8/112/14, Extract from the Hijazi newspaper *Umm Al-Qura*, 26 April 1935.
[205] AUB, 'Al-ṭarīq al-muktashaf ilā-l-Ḥijāz', *Al-Sha'b*, 27 May 1935, p. 3.
[206] AUB, 'Al-ladhīna shaqqū' al-ṭarīq ilā-l-Ḥijāz', *Al-Sha'b*, 8 June 1935, p. 3.

route that was located within Saudi territory in case the restoration of the Hijaz Railway—which had priority in his eyes—fell through. He wished to await the outcome of the upcoming conference to be held in Haifa.[207] As the members of the expedition explained to *Al-Sha'b* in August 1935, they had decided to postpone their project until after the Haifa conference.[208]

When it became clear that Damascus would never be connected to Medina by rail,[209] the transport companies began to lobby the French Mandate authorities, as they understood that the development of the Damascus–Medina route could not be achieved without their support. In November 1935, the *Sociétés Réunies* sent a long letter to the French delegate in Damascus calling for French assistance. Reminding the delegate first of their efforts to maintain pilgrim traffic on the Syrian route by offering low rates, they reaffirmed their willingness to develop a regular transport service between Damascus and Medina in order to prevent the Darb Zubayda route from capturing the entire pilgrim traffic emanating from India, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and the French mandated territories. To convince the French, they presented the project as one that provided a complementary as opposed to competitive route to the French-supported sea route.

> Notre but n'est pas de concurrencer la route maritime, au contraire nous avons fait notre possible l'année dernière pour engager les pèlerins à pratiquer la route par mer, nous le ferons cette année aussi, mais il est de toute nécessité pour engager les pèlerins à venir en Syrie à ce que nous leur offrons une route par terre aussi.[210]

The French response to the proposal of the *Sociétés Réunies* was lukewarm, just as it had been to the expedition of April 1935.[211] As the time of the next pilgrimage approached, M. Khayat, a delegate of the *Sociétés Réunies*, visited the French High Commission to inquire about their position on the organisation of the pilgrimage by land. The French officials categorically refused, arguing that this would create complications from the health point of view. Moreover,

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[207] TNA, FO 684/8/112/14, Extracts from *Al-Ayyam*, 15 May 1935; TNA, FO 684/8/112/14, Memorandum on the Damascus–Medina Route written by the first dragoman of the British consulate, Damascus, 11 June 1935.
[208] AUB, 'Ṭarīq al-ṣaḥrā' bayna Sūriyā wa-l-Ḥijāz', *Al-Sha'b*, 20 August 1935, p.2. See also 'Ṭarīq al-Ḥijāz al-barrī', *Al-Sha'b*, 2 October 1935, p. 2.
[209] AUB, 'Le problème du chemin de fer du Hejaz: Quelles sont les entraves qui s'opposent au rétablissement de cette voie ?', *Le Commerce du Levant*, p. 1.
[210] CADN, 1SL/1/V/664, *Sociétés Réunies de transport transdésertique et de tourisme* to French delegate of the High Commissioner, Damascus, 5 November 1935. Translation: 'Our aim is not to compete with the sea route, on the contrary we did our best last year to encourage pilgrims to use the sea route, and we will do so this year as well, but in order to encourage pilgrims to come to Syria it is necessary that we offer them an overland route as well.'
[211] *Records of the Hajj: A Documentary History of the Pilgrimage to Mecca: Vol. 7* (S.l.: Archive Edition, 1933): British Consul Mackereth to the British Minister in Jedda, Damascus, 12 June 1935.

they opined that the different companies had nothing to gain from a proliferation of pilgrimage routes and would do better to stick to the current organisation.[212]

In the following years, the *Sociétés Réunies* and other economic actors repeatedly called for the establishment of a land route between Damascus and Medina, but each time, the French authorities turned a deaf ear to their requests.[213] However, the second half of the 1930s, saw the development of a trend of clandestine movements of Lebanese and Syrian pilgrims departing overland from their countries, notably in reaction to the French obligation to travel by sea, as Luc Chantre has shown. Between 1936 and 1940, despite the French ban on land routes, many pilgrims left Lebanon and Syria by crossing the border with Transjordan, sometimes with the help of smugglers.[214] A significant number of pilgrims also attempted to reach Iraq from Syria so as to proceed to Medina via the Najaf–Medina route, either by claiming that they wanted to visit Iraqi shrines or by attempting to cross the Syrian–Iraqi border illegally.[215] These clandestine movements of pilgrims further reinforced the decline of the maritime route via Beirut, so much so that some French officials began to lean towards organising the pilgrimages by land. In December 1939, this was the opinion of the French delegate to the Syrian Government, who reported that no member of the Syrian parliament was convinced of the merits of the current French arrangements. He pointed out that by announcing the organisation of the pilgrimage by land that would take place in 1940, the French would also gain in prestige.[216] Using the same argument, the *Sociétés Réunies* reiterated their request to the High Commission in June 1940, stating that the organisation of the Syrian pilgrimage by land would ensure 'the benevolence of Muslim circles' towards the French administration.[217]

War-related developments changed the conditions for the organisation of the Syrian pilgrimage. At the end of June 1940, the French colonial and Mandate administrations in North Africa and Lebanon/Syria submitted to the newly proclaimed Vichy government.[218] British

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[212] CADN, 1SL/1/V/664, Note from *Cabinet Politique*, Beirut [no date]; AUB, 'Les Stés de Transport réunies adopteraient pour le prochain pèlerinage la voie de terre Transjordanie – Médine', *Le Commerce du Levant*, 6 December 1935, p. 2.

[213] For details of later calls for the establishment of an overland pilgrimage route from Damascus, see AUB, 'Sharika li-l-naql bayna Dimashq wa-l-Madīna', *Beirut*, 20 August 1938, p. 3.

[214] Luc Chantre, *Pèlerinages d'empire*, pp. 303–306.

[215] AUB, 'Ṭalā'i' al-ḥujjāj', *Al-Bilad*, 24 January 1937, p. 4; AUB, 'Les pèlerins musulans empruntent la route désertique', *Le Commerce du Levant*, 2 December 1938, p. 2 ; 'Al-ḥujjāj al-ḥalabiyyūn wa ṭarīq al-ḥajj al-barrī', *Al-Bilad*, 11 January 1939, p. 5; CADN, 1SL/1/V/665, the French Ambassador Lescuyer to the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, Baghdad, 28 January 1940.

[216] CADN, 1SL/1/V/664, the French delegate of the High Commissioner to the Syrian Government to High Commissioner Puaux, Beirut, 12 December 1939.

[217] CADN, 1SL/1/V/664, *Sociétés Réunies des Transports Transdésertiques* to the delegate of the High Commissioner, Damascus, 8 June 1940.

[218] The Vichy administration of Syria and Lebanon lasted for about one year, before Allied control was restored in mid-July 1941 after a joint military campaign waged by the British and Free French forces. See Philip S. Khoury,

forces in the Mediterranean urged the Vichy authorities in Syria and Lebanon to explore the possibilities of undertaking an overland pilgrimage. In a report on this matter, Dr Martin, the Inspector General of Hygiene Services, compared the advantages of motorised transport and pack-animal transport. Given the wartime situation, he favoured the use of camels, pointing to the waste of fuel that would be incurred if pilgrims were transported by car. He then examined the different possible routes either through Iraq or through Transjordan. With regard to the Damascus–Medina route, he mentioned the recent letter received from the *Sociétés Réunies* and, surprisingly, did not make the connection between the latter company and those that had undertaken the expedition in 1935. He did, however, believe that there was a feasible route via the Transjordan.[219] In the end, however, the French authorities considered that the Damascus–Medina route presented too many disadvantages, both because of the poor condition of the track and because of the diplomatic arrangements it would require. In this context, the transiting of Syrian and Lebanese pilgrims through Baghdad entailed the advantage of being able to rely on an existing and longstanding organisation. The transport of pilgrims between Damascus and Baghdad was entrusted to the *Sociétés Réunies* alone, which organised two convoys on 20 and 27 December 1940, carrying a total of 240 Lebanese and Syrian pilgrims who were then able to take one of the convoys that left Baghdad for the Hijaz.[220] The outbreak of the Second World War finally prompted the French to organise the pilgrimages of Syrians and Lebanese overland by routing them through Iraq. Once again, a shift in the pilgrimage route impacted on transdesert traffic between Damascus and Baghdad. But this time, it gave a new lease of life to the *Sociétés Réunies* by enabling the organisation to take over the transport of Syrian and Lebanese pilgrims.

This examination of the shifting tourism and pilgrimage routes that crisscrossed Iraq and Syria provides new insights into transdesert connectivity, revealing how the Baghdad–Damascus route functioned as a global crossroads. The development of a rail and bus service

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Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920–1945 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 583–596; George Kirk, *The Middle East in the War* (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), pp. 78–104.

[219] CADN, 1SL/1/V/664, Dr Martin, Inspector General of Hygiene Services to the French High Commissioner, Beirut, 2 October 1940. Mentioning the letter from the *Sociétés Réunies* dated 8 October 1930, he wrote: 'J'ai été très surprise de ne trouver nulle part confirmation de la prospection de cet itinéraire. Je ne connais pas d'autres prospections que les suivantes : Les 31 Mars et 2 Avril 1935 partaient de Damas deux petits convois, l'un dit "Groupe des Chauffeurs", l'autre dit "Groupe des Commerçants".'

[220] CADN, 1SL/1/V/664, the French High Commissioner Puaux to the French delegate to the Lebanese government, Beirut, 27 November 1940; CADC, 4GMII166, Telegram from High Commissioner Puaux No. 1525 to an unknown recipient, Beirut, 31 October 1940; CADN, 1SL/1/V/664, communiqué by the French delegation, Damascus, 10 December 1940; Jean Lescuyer (the French Minister in Iraq) to the French High Commissioner, Baghdad, 27 December 1940. See also Luc Chantre, *Pèlerinages d'empire*, pp. 355–356.

along the route of the Baghdad Railway provided an alternative to the Baghdad–Damascus route for travellers and tourists moving between Europe and Iraq. However, it did not have major implications for companies operating between Damascus and Baghdad. By contrast, the opening of the Baghdad–Medina route affected trans-desert traffic and caused significant harm to companies, even leading some people to fear that Damascus would become more isolated regionally. In other words, following the increasing incorporation of the Baghdad–Damascus route into transregional mobility networks in the 1920s, major disconnections were evident in the second half of the 1930s. This observation indicates that even though the Syrian–Iraqi region experienced increasing transregional and even global integration during the interwar period, this does not mean that the process unfolded evenly and without setbacks, reversals and disconnections that could have local impacts. The case study of the 1935 expedition from Damascus to Medina has provided insights into how local actors sought to respond to the changing pilgrimage routes, to develop alternatives to the French-controlled routes and to encourage new trade connections. However, this case study also highlights serious constraints to their agency and the risks associated with over-reliance on transregional mobility networks.

Conclusion

Shortly after the First World War, many commentators believed that the expansion of motorised transport across the Syrian Desert would open up a corridor between the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf, thereby establishing new connections between Europe and Central/South Asia. For French and British administrators, the Baghdad–Damascus route was to become a key transport infrastructure integrated into a wider web of transregional networks, thus realising the long-awaited project of developing an alternative route to the Suez Canal. This chapter has examined the reshaping of transdesert connectivity through the lens of the long-distance mobilities that unfolded along the Baghdad–Damascus route and their interactions with the transdesert transport system. It has shown that the development of the Baghdad–Damascus route increased the prominence of the Syrian–Iraqi space within a world of increasingly integrated nation-states, contributing to its emergence both as a passageway and as a tourist destination. However, as I have shown, the integration of the transport system between Damascus and Baghdad into transregional networks was not a seamless, progressive and steady process.

The chapter has traced, first of all, how the Baghdad–Damascus route was shaped into a global crossroads during the interwar period. The development of transdesert traffic combined with the actions of multiple actors promoting travel throughout the region transformed the

geography associated with the journeys of European travellers and Central Asian pilgrims, encouraging the development and diversion of transregional mobilities through Syria and Iraq. This development also relied on the interweaving of the transdesert transport service with connected services of transport networks extending beyond the Syrian Desert. On one side, these networks comprised the maritime lines connecting the eastern and southern shores of the Mediterranean to the ports of Italy and France; the railway network leading from Damascus and Haifa to Egypt, with connections to ships operating on the Red Sea to the Hijaz and on the Mediterranean to Europe; and the railway network linking Aleppo to Istanbul and to Europe by means of the Taurus Express and the Orient Express. On the other side, the Iraqi Railways network linked Baghdad to numerous Iraqi sites but also to Khanaqin and Basra, from where travellers could continue their journeys by car and boat to Iran and India, respectively. Until the completion of the Baghdad Railway in 1940, the Baghdad–Damascus route bridged these different networks. The interweaving of the transdesert route into these transport networks underlines the interconnectivity of different modes of transport, which was also apparent in the extension of the Baghdad Railway line over the course of the 1930s.

For transport entrepreneurs operating between Baghdad, Damascus and Beirut, the interweaving of the transdesert routes into wider transport networks was a source of opportunity as well as constraint and risk. As we have seen, many transport companies relied on the business provided by European tourists and travellers, for example, the Nairn Transport Company, and on the transport of hajj pilgrims, notably the *Sociétés Réunies*. In order to satisfy these customers, some of them had to develop services that met their expectations in terms of price, transport conditions and equipment. In addition, the interweaving of the transdesert routes into global mobility networks required a close coordination between the transdesert service and that of the related rail and shipping companies in order to avoid delays at each transfer point. This requirement was particularly acute for tourist, mail and freight companies, which tried to align their timetables with those of the rail and shipping companies. Furthermore, the demand for close connections became an argument for accelerating transdesert traffic by reducing the major impediments to the development of transregional movements across Syria and Iraq. In short, delays and poor connections came to be judged against the need for efficiency and speed that arose from the interweaving of the Baghdad–Damascus route into transregional transport systems.

Although the Baghdad–Damascus route became a node within a wider mesh of transport networks, this position was never permanently established. As shown earlier in this dissertation, a number of competing projects aimed to connect the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf by road

and rail in the aftermath of the First World War. Examining the movement of tourists and pilgrims through Syria and Iraq, it becomes evident that the transregional routes crossing Syria and Iraq were constantly being reshaped and redirected in the interwar years. Several routes emerged in the 1930s that coexisted or competed with the Baghdad–Damascus route—as did the Baghdad–Haifa route examined in Chapter 3—but this time bypassing the Syrian Desert. Firstly, a combined train and bus route linked Syria and Iraq from the north, pending the completion of the Baghdad Railway, attracting some of the travellers moving between Europe and Iraq. Secondly, a new pilgrimage route was opened between Baghdad and Medina, which not only captured much of the hajj traffic that had previously plied via Damascus but also attracted increasing numbers of Syrians and Lebanese pilgrims, who were reluctant to travel via the port of Beirut. These re-routing dynamics deeply affected the transport companies operating between Damascus and Baghdad. Overall, they demonstrate the tenuous and temporary nature of the transregional connections spawned by the expansion of motorised transport across the Syrian Desert.

Chapter 6 – Beyond Borders?
Travel, Travel Writing and Regional Space

Introduction

> I think I am right in mentioning [that] this new land route provides a rapid and easy form of transport for the exchange of visits between officials and inhabitants of the two mandated territories, who will thereby come to know and understand each other better, thus fostering that cordial co-operation between the administrations of the two countries which is so necessary to their peaceful development.[1]

These words were used by Major McCallum, the British liaison officer in Beirut, to describe the development of the Baghdad–Damascus route in a lecture that he delivered in Beirut in November 1924. He mentioning the regular flow of passengers already moving between Beirut and Baghdad just one year after the inauguration of a regular transport service, expressing his conviction that transdesert transport would bring the people of Iraq, Syria and Lebanon closer together. This view was clearly inspired by the 'internationalist idealism' that prevailed in the early twentieth century, according to which the development of trade, travel and tourism would prevent conflict by improving understanding between peoples.[2] Moreover, in this particular case, the Major's speech was intended to assure his French counterparts of the aspiration of the British Mandate authorities for 'cordial co-operation' with their neighbours. His statement nevertheless raises a few questions. What kinds of movements and interactions developed between the countries that bordered the Syrian Desert in the interwar years? How did people's spatial representations change with the expansion of travel? Did transdesert mobility bring the inhabitants of the French and British mandated territories closer together at a time when national borders were being consolidated?

A few historians have pointed out that the Syrian Desert took on a new character in the interwar period. During these years, the desert was transformed 'into an expanse connecting [Greater Syria] with Egypt, Arabia and Iraq'.[3] As Robert Blecher has observed, perceptions of

[1] TNA, AIR 23/85, 'The French in Syria 1924–1926', lecture given by Major McCallum, British liaison officer, Beirut, November 1924, p. 21.
[2] Sune Bechmann Pedersen, 'A Passport to Peace? Modern Tourism and Internationalist Idealism', *European Review* 28:3 (June 2020), pp. 389–402; Susan Pedersen, *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 234.
[3] Cyrus Schayegh, *The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), p. 14.

the Syrian Desert also changed. 'Seen in the 1920s as an endless expanse that stretched out from the Anti-Lebanon Mountains, the desert in the 1930s came to be seen as a defined space that linked Damascus on one side to Baghdad on the other.'[4] Vincent Capdepuy has argued that the development of transdesert transport was one of the factors that contributed to the 'revival of the centrality of Syrian-Iraqi space' during the interwar period.[5] Along with the emergence of Arab nationalism in the nineteenth century and the discovery of oil resources around Mosul in the 1930s, the expansion of (motorised and air) transport across the desert gave rise to a space straddling the Syrian Desert, on which the notion of 'Middle East' would crystallise in the run-up to the Second World War.[6] This chapter investigates the emergence of the Syrian–Iraqi space by focusing on the experiences of Arab travellers. It addresses the question of whether, at a time when space was being redefined as bounded and national, transdesert mobility shaped a space that straddled proto-national territories.

Since the publication of Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*, space is no longer understood as a unit that pre-exists what lies within it; rather, it is conceived as a product of everyday social practices, forms of territorial organisation as well as perceptions and imaginations.[7] In 2005, Doreen Massey argued that a conception of the social production of space has two implications: firstly, that the nature of space is multiple and plural and secondly, and more importantly, that space is constantly being reshaped in a never-ending process.[8] Some historical studies on the Middle East have examined the ways in which cross-border movements and interactions can produce alternatives to bounded national spaces. At a workshop focusing on borders and mobilities held in 2012, Véronique Bontemps, Cyril Roussel and Philippe Bourmaud posited that patterns of cross-border mobility shape '*pays'* (countries), considered as relational spaces that extend beyond state borders and are constantly being renewed .[9] They also proposed the concept of '*espaces familiers*' (familiar spaces) as a way of thinking of spaces

[4] Robert Blecher, 'Desert Medicine, Ethnography, and the Colonial Encounter in Mandatory Syria', in Nadine Méouchy and Peter Sluglett (eds.), *The British and the French Mandates in Comparative Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), p. 255.
[5] Vincent Capdepuy, 'Proche ou Moyen-Orient ? Géohistoire de la notion de Middle East', *L'Espace géographique* 37:3 (2008), p. 232. In the original French: 'réactualisation de l'espace syro-irakien'.
[6] Ibid., pp. 225–238.
[7] Henri Lefebvre, *La production de l'espace* (Paris: Anthropos, 1974 [English, 1991]).
[8] Doreen B. Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage, 2005), pp. 9–15. See also Matthias Middell and Katja Naumann, 'Global History and the Spatial Turn: From the Impact of Area Studies to the Study of Critical Junctures of Globalization', *Journal of Global History* 5:1 (2010), pp. 155–156.
[9] Véronique Bontemps, Cyril Roussel and Philippe Bourmaud, 'Frontières et circulations au Moyen-Orient. Dynamiques des espaces frontaliers et des circulations transfrontalières', *Les Carnets de l'Ifpo: La recherche en train de se faire à l'Institut français du Proche-Orient*, 27 July 2012. https://ifpo.hypotheses.org/4070 (accessed 4 June 2022). Original French: 'des ensembles relationnels faits de liens qui s'actualisent par-delà les territoires limités par les frontières étatiques'.

that straddle territorial borders.[10] More recently, Toufoul Abou-Hodeib has examined the movement of Shiite, Druze and Jewish pilgrims between southern Lebanon and northern Palestine in the interwar period, showing that these communities enabled 'religious and confessional identities [...] to continue across borders' by negotiating with the authorities about their cross-border practices.[11] Looking more broadly at the movements of pilgrims, merchants and smugglers across the borders of post-Ottoman states, Abou-Hodeib has demonstrated the persistence of conceptions of space, which are at odds with national space. She argues: 'For even as state formation processes transformed the Levant, cross-border movements extended another kind of geography and continued to articulate identities that straddled those borders.'[12]

Taking its cue from these works, this chapter argues that transdesert mobility helped to integrate the nascent territorial states bordering the Syrian Desert and created favourable conditions for the emergence of a regional space overlapping with—but not undermining—nationally bounded spaces.[13] As understood here, this regional space was primarily a social space at odds with state borders. Spanning the Syrian Desert, it emerged through social interactions and networks that intensified during the interwar period.[14] The patterns of transdesert mobility explored in this chapter support a flexible understanding of this regional space; while at times the chapter examines interactions that wove through the Syrian–Iraqi space, at other times it looks at travel practices that forged ties stretching as far as Egypt. As Anssi Paasi and Jonathan Metzger point out, regions do not exist as such; they 'become,

[10] Ibid. See also V. Bontemps, C. Roussel and P. Bourmaud, 'Au(x) pays: espaces familiers, mobilités entravées et lien social autour de la Jordanie', *Carnets du LARHA* No. 1 (2012), pp. 71–76.
[11] Toufoul Abou-Hodeib, 'Sanctity across the Border: Pilgrimage Routes and State Control in Mandate Lebanon and Palestine', in Cyrus Schayegh and Andrew Arsan (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of the History of the Middle East Mandates* (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 392.
[12] Toufoul Abou-Hodeib, 'Involuntary History: Writing Levantines into the Nation', *Contemporary Levant* 5:1 (January 2020), p. 48.
[13] This view endorses previous findings that regional integration did not occur at the expense of national integration, and vice versa. See, for instance, Cyrus Schayegh, *The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World*. See also Mikiya Koyagi, who has shown that travel on the Trans-Iranian Railway transformed people's spatial imaginations and 'amplified multiple senses of belonging', but it did not weaken 'the spatiopolitical category of nation.' Mikiya Koyagi, *Iran in Motion: Mobility, Space, and the Trans-Iranian Railway* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021), pp. 190–194. See also Simon Jackson, who has argued that the development of automobility between Lebanon and Syria produced 'a doubled experience of national space', with people increasingly moving between Beirut and Damascus at a time when two distinct states were being formed. Simon Jackson, 'Motoring Towards Lebanon: Neo-Phoenician Nationalism and Automobile Imports to the Mashriq: 1919–1934', conference paper (20 April 2012), quoted in Jacob Norris, *Land of Progress: Palestine in the Age of Colonial Development, 1905-1948* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp 104–105.
[14] This chapter draws on studies that have given new importance to the concept of region and especially on the literature that conceives of regions as social products. See Tim Cresswell, *Geographic Thought: A Critical Introduction* (Chichester: Wiley–Blackwell, 2013), pp. 60–75; Anssi Paasi and Jonathan Metzger, 'Foregrounding the Region', *Regional Studies* 51:1 (2017), pp. 22–23; Cyrus Schayegh, 'Regions and Global History: An Arab-Iranian Case Study and Three Observations', *Journal of Levantine Studies* 10:1 (2020), pp. 25–44. See also Matthias Middell (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Transregional Studies* (London: Routledge, 2018).

transform, achieve meanings, and may ultimately become deinstitutionalized', thus forming 'historically contingent processes' that need to be traced.[15] This chapter examines this process as it unfolded during the interwar years, without claiming that it led to the gradual strengthening of a regional space with the same degree of integration (and thus meaning) as, for example, the region of *Bilad al-Sham*. Rather, it aims to capture the dynamics with the potential for contributing to some degree of regionalisation. In fact, no region constitutes a homogenous spatial unit. Again, Doreen Massey reminds us that space never forms a 'coherent system'.[16] While the development of transdesert mobility created spatial relationships across the Syrian–Iraqi border, this does not imply that this process was constitutive of a homogenous and coherent Syrian–Iraqi space. In fact, transdesert movements only brought certain groups and places closer together: many travel practices remained the preserve of a wealthy social class, and transnational connections did not reach the same level everywhere. In sum, by speaking of a regional space straddling the Syrian Desert, above all I wish to foreground a plurality of spaces, showing that state territories coexisted with a regional space that was lived, experienced and imagined (or hoped for)[17]—a space that rarely appears in historical studies of mobility and connectivity in the post-Ottoman Middle East.

The chapter focuses on the travels of tourists, summer visitors, journalists, students, scouts and politicians, which reveal different forms of interaction that laced the Syrian–Iraqi space. To begin with, it highlights various practices that formed part of expanding regional tourism in the interwar period. While examining how these movements helped to knit together the territories bordering the Syrian Desert, the chapter also adds to the scholarship on local forms of tourism in the Middle East. Historical studies have long focused primarily on the development of European tourism along the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean.[18] Criticising the conflation of tourists with Western travellers within this scholarship, a special issue of the *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change* in 2010 addressed existing gaps in the

[15] Anssi Paasi and Jonathan Metzger, 'Foregrounding the region', pp. 22–23.
[16] Doreen B. Massey, *For Space*, pp. 11–12: 'Space can never be that completed simultaneity in which all interconnections have been established, and in which everywhere is already linked with everywhere else.' On the continued dominance of local centres and the lack of regional coherence within *Bilad al-Sham* itself, see Cyrus Schayegh, 'On Scales and Spaces: Reading Gottlieb Schumacher's *The Jaulân* (1888)', in Liat Kozma, Cyrus Schayegh and Avner Wishnitzer (eds), *A Global Middle East: Mobility, Materiality and Culture in the Modern Age, 1880-1940* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), p. 30.
[17] This chapter also takes inspiration from studies on space, border and mobility in the context of the Sahara; see Camille Lefebvre, *Frontières de sable, frontières de papier. Histoire de territoires et de frontières, du jihad de Sokoto à la colonisation française du Niger (XIXe-XXe siècles)* (Paris: Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2015); James McDougall and Judith Scheele (eds.), *Saharan Frontiers: Space and Mobility in Northwest Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012).
[18] See Chapter 5.

research, but only for the post-1960s period.[19] In this issue, Waleed Hazbun argued that prior to the colonial period, no tourism industry existed, and that the industry became fully 'integrated into the transportation networks, economic structures, and cultures of European imperialism' in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[20] However, in doing so, he disregarded the tourism practices of local populations in the early decades of the twentieth century. Recently, there has been renewed interest in the study of tourism and the tourism industry in the Middle East.[21] The growth of regional tourism associated with Arab travellers is attracting increasing attention.[22] A pioneering paper is that of Andrea Stanton, who has shown that the growth of regional tourism in Palestine and Lebanon during the interwar period was characterised both by the scale of movement and the emergence of tourism enterprises in which the Arab press played an important part. As she put it, 'the inhabitants of the former Ottoman provinces began understanding their national territory as a brand that could be marketed to their neighbors and not only to foreign residents in the region.'[23] This chapter makes a further contribution to this growing field of research by demonstrating the growth of regional tourism that took advantage of the development of transdesert transportation.

While for some, travelling was primarily a means of reaching remote places to enjoy a temperate climate and a restful atmosphere as well as to visit tourist sites, for others it had a more reflective and performative dimension. As we shall see, many journalists felt an urgent need to explore their own countries but also neighbouring regions and territories, given advances in transportation that made it easier to do so. They saw travel primarily as a journey of exploration to acquire knowledge. Other intellectuals assigned a political meaning to travelling. In the Mandate period, the promotion of travel was one of many forms of 'politically infused cultural practices', which contributed as much to shaping senses of national belonging as they did to forging transnational identifications.[24] Against the background of mounting Arab

[19] Waleed Hazbun, 'Revising Itineraries of Tourism and Tourism Studies in the Middle East and North Africa', *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change* 8:4 (2010), pp. 225–239.
[20] Ibid., p. 226; Waleed Hazbun, 'The East as an Exhibit: Thomas Cook & Son and the origins of the International Tourism Industry in Egypt', in Philip Scranton and Janet F. Davidson (eds.), *The Business of Tourism: Place, Faith, and History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), pp. 13, 30.
[21] The following conferences are illustrative of this renewed interest: *Travelling Practices and the Emergence of Tourism in the Middle East (16th – 20th Centuries)*, convened by Christine Nölle-Karimi, Yavuz Köse and Onur Inal, University of Vienna, 27–30 September 2021; *Travel, Mobility, and Cultural Conflict in the Middle East and North Africa*, convened by a committee chaired by Waleed Hazbun, University of Alabama, 9–10 April 2022.
[22] See Nadya Sbaiti's ongoing project on tourism in the Mashriq, which she presented at different recently held conferences.
[23] Andrea L. Stanton, 'Locating Palestine's Summer Residence: Mandate Tourism and National Identity', *Journal of Palestine Studies* 47:2 (2018), p. 46.
[24] Alongside education, sport and scouting, for example; see Cyrus Schayegh and Andrew Arsan, *The Routledge Handbook of the History of the Middle East Mandates* (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 12.

nationalism, travel was seen by some as a way of grasping and shaping an 'imaginary space', which transcended the borders of the post-Ottoman states.[25]

To achieve its aim, this chapter combines the use of government archives with an examination of literary and cultural productions in Arabic, consisting primarily of travel accounts published as books and in newspapers.[26] These sources reveal widespread enthusiasm among the Arab middle class for the new modes of transport and associated infrastructure and highlight their use for exploring the countries surrounding the Syrian Desert.[27] Travelogues shed light on the experiences and perceptions of these intellectuals as they moved through national and regional spaces and visited some places for the first time. These textual productions mirrored people's changing engagements with space in the 1920s, but also, in turn, influenced their behaviour.[28] In addition, journalists, professors and political figures published travel stories to introduce their readers to their country or to encourage them to visit neighbouring cities and regions beyond state borders. Travel writing thus played an active role in cultivating people's desire to travel alongside more readily identifiable actors, such as transport companies and tourist agencies. In addition to this promotional dimension, travelogues and guidebooks also had a prescriptive function. They worked to stage national and regional space in particular ways, highlighting certain features, routes and sites (and not others) for a specific public.[29] In this sense, they contributed to shaping the spatial imagination of their readers.

Many travel accounts were published in the newspapers in the form of serials (i.e. a series of articles published in consecutive issues). Serial writing was not a new journalistic genre, as serialised novels had already been published in the Arab and Ottoman press during the nineteenth century. This format went hand in hand with the expansion of the press in the late Ottoman period and contributed to the increased circulation of newspapers.[30] Besides

[25] Peter Wien, *Arab Nationalism: The Politics of History and Culture in the Modern Middle East* (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 2.

[26] Needless to say, these travel writings can only reflect some of the travel practices involving Syria and Iraq, because most travellers did not write, as Christoph Herzog and Raoul Motika remind us. Christoph Herzog and Raoul Motika, 'Orientalism "alla turca": Late 19th/Early 20th Century Ottoman Voyages into the Muslim "Outback"', *Die Welt des Islams* 40:2 (2000), p. 158.

[27] Keith David Watenpaugh, *Being Modern in the Middle East: Revolution, Nationalism, Colonialism, and the Arab Middle Class* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

[28] See the introduction to the collective book edited by Johannes Riquet and Elizabeth Kollmann, which explores the relationship between literary/cultural productions, spatial transformations and spatial imaginaries. Johannes Riquet, 'Framing the Debate: Spatial Modernities, Travelling Narrative', in Johannes Riquet and Elizabeth Kollmann (eds.), *Spatial Modernities: Geography, Narrative, Imaginaries* (New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 1–24, here: 17.

[29] On how 'cultures of travel' shape a 'space of constructed visibility', see Derek Gregory, 'Colonial Nostalgia and Cultures of Travel: Spaces of Constructed Visibility in Egypt', in Nezar Alsayyad (ed.), *Consuming Tradition, Manufacturing Heritage* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 111–151.

[30] Marie-Claire Djaballah Boulahbel, 'L'article-feuilleton', *Yod* No. 17 (2012), pp. 87–97; Reyhan Tutumlu and Ali Serdar, 'A Distant Reading of the Ottoman/Turkish Serial Novel Tradition (1831–1908)', in Daniel Stein and

fictional stories, some travel accounts were also published in this format in the press in the early twentieth century, that is, before the advent of motorised transport.[31] In the serialised travel narratives discussed below, the journalists numbered each article and sometimes ended them with the words 'to be continued'.[32]

These travel narratives benefited from the increasing circulation of newspapers in the interwar years. A large number of new periodicals were launched during this period, in line with the steady expansion of 'printing and mass reading' in the second half of the nineteenth century and the launch of many newspapers following the Young Turk Revolution of 1908.[33] Several dozen, if not hundreds, of periodicals were launched in Lebanon, Syria, Palestine and Iraq in the 1920s and 1930s, even though their lifespans varied greatly. Many of them did not last long, mainly for economic reasons but also because they had to cope with strict press regulations and with government censorship that made outright opposition difficult. At the same time, journalism became more professional in the interwar years, as evidenced by the creation of unions. The press also diversified, and daily newspapers appeared in Syria, Palestine and Iraq. The circulation of the main newspapers fluctuated between 1,000 and 4,000 copies, regardless of their periodicity, and tended to increase over this period. By 1929, the circulation of *Al-Sha'b* (a Damascus daily) reached about 1,500 copies, that of *L'Orient* (a Beirut daily) reached about 3,700 copies, while those of *Filastin* (a Jaffa bi-weekly/daily paper) and of *Al-Jami'a al-Arabiyya* (a Jerusalem daily) respectively reached 2,500–3,000 copies and 1,500–2,000 copies. In 1929, when it was founded, *Al-Bilad* (a Baghdad, daily) had about 1,000 subscriptions in a country where the circulation of newspapers was somewhat lower than in the other Mandate states. The readership mainly comprised a well-off and educated class, even though several historians have shown that press information was also transmitted orally, for example, through public reading of newspapers in cafés.[34]

Lisanna Wiele (eds.), *Nineteenth-Century Serial Narrative in Transnational Perspective, 1830s–1860s: Popular Culture-Serial Culture* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 95–114.

[31] Although I cannot trace the beginnings of this travel writing format (most likely earlier than the twentieth century), I can point to the following example: 'Izz al-Din al-Tannukhi, 'Fī bādiyyat al-shām', *Al-Muqtataf*, No. 5, 1 May 1917. https://archive.alsharekh.org/Articles/107/9385/188072 (accessed 4 June 2022). The follow-up story was published in several subsequent issues of the monthly newspaper up to April 1918.

[32] Examples include *lahā baqiyya; al-baqiyya ta'tī*.

[33] Quote: Ami Ayalon, 'New Practices: Arab Printing, Progress and Mass Reading', in Liat Kozma, Cyrus Schayegh and Avner Wishnitzer (eds.), *A Global Middle East*, pp. 321–344. On the proliferation of the press following the Young Turk Revolution of 1908, see also Ami Ayalon, *The Press in the Arab Middle East: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 65; Keith David Watenpaugh, *Being Modern in the Middle East*, pp. 70–81.

[34] Ami Ayalon, *The Press in the Arab Middle East*, pp. 73–106, 138–165; Mustafa Kabha, 'The Arabic Palestinian Press between the Two World Wars' in Anthony Gorman and Didier Monciaud (eds.), *The Press in the Middle East and North Africa, 1850–1950: Politics, Social History and Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), pp. 99–125; Nadine Méouchy, 'La presse de Syrie et du Liban entre les deux guerres (1918-1939)', *Revue*

Assessing Cross-Border Movements

Before delving into experiences of cross-border mobility, it is necessary to say a few words about the nature and scale of Iraqi, Syrian and Lebanese transdesert mobility. Reading between the lines of the sources reveals a greater variety of travel practices than those elaborated in this chapter. For example, various people travelled across the desert to visit relatives.[35] The material I have collected so far, however, does not enable me to include such movements in the analysis. I would like to stress here, however, that the profiles of Iraqi, Syrian and Lebanese travellers who embarked on journeys across the Syrian Desert were more diverse than it would appear. This can be seen, for example, in a document produced by the French consulate in Baghdad about Iraqis who applied for visas between 29 October and 3 November 1937. Although its content cannot be generalised to the entire interwar period, this document provides a very insightful overview of Iraqis who travelled to Syria during this six-day span, as it specifies the names, dates and places of birth, places of residence and occupations of these individuals.[36] Of the twenty-three people who were granted visas during this period, only one was a woman: a certain Rahlou Soffer, born in Izmir in 1900 and listed as being 'without profession'. The occupations of the 22 men were as follows: one butcher, one farmer, one carpenter, two students, one theology student, one driver, one employee, one pharmacist, one officer, one civil servant, two landlords and nine traders. Finally, the median age of this group of twenty-three individuals was thirty-six years old, with the youngest being fifteen and sixteen years old (the two students) and the oldest being seventy years (the butcher). This snapshot of Iraqi travellers to Syria in late 1937 reveals a wide variety of profiles in terms of age and occupation. However, the group stands out for the overwhelming majority of men in its composition. Unfortunately, no other statistics on transdesert traffic provide information on the proportions of men and women for comparison. Yet, figures from the second quarterly report

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des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée No. 95–98 (2002), pp. 55–70; Peter Wien, *Iraqi Arab Nationalism: Authoritarian, Totalitarian and Pro-Fascist Inclinations, 1932-1941* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 52–56. On the censorship of the press in the French Mandate, see also Idir Ouahes, S*yria and Lebanon under the French Mandate: Cultural Imperialism and the Workings of Empire* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018), pp. 153–160.

[35] The *Sûreté Générale* of Aleppo drew up a list of Syrians who received passports between 1 and 15 April 1925 to leave the French mandated territories. Only three out of sixty-one people left for Iraq: one was visiting his brother, one was a trader travelling for business reasons, and the motive of the third was not specified. CADN, 1SL/1/V/846, 'Passeports délivrés du 1er au 15 avril 1925', *Sûreté Générale*, Aleppo to the Director of the Sûreté Générale, Beirut, 27 April 1925. In addition, Freya Stark, the British author, recounted travelling between Damascus and Baghdad with women from Aleppo who were visiting their brother working in Baghdad. Freya Stark, *Baghdad Sketches* (London: Murray, 1937), p. 5.

[36] CADN, 1SL/1/V/1027, table attached to a letter from Paul Lépissier to the French High Commissioner, Baghdad, 4 November 1936.

of the *Sûreté Générale* of Damascus for 1928 indicated that 16,192 people left the city by car (in all directions) during this period, of whom 3,325 were women (20.5%). The nationalities of these people was not specified. The same report noted that, during the same quarter, 5,107 people stayed in hotels in Damascus, of whom 617 were women (12.1%) within a group of whom 15% were foreigners (neither Syrians nor Lebanese).[37]

Besides the diversity of profiles, the mobility of Iraqis, Syrians and Lebanese was fairly significant. Records from the French consulate in Baghdad provide statistics by nationality on travellers entering and leaving Iraq between 1927 and 1937. These figures show, unsurprisingly, that the Syrians and Lebanese held first place if we discount the British as well as the Indian and Iranian pilgrims. Their number hovered at around 4,000 entries per year, with a peak of 6,095 in 1929 and a slight drop in entries to 2,881 in 1936. The figures for those leaving Iraq followed a very similar pattern (Figure 20). By comparison, the number of Palestinians who entered Iraq during the same period fluctuated between a minimum of 141 in 1927 and a maximum of 622 in 1937. As for Egyptians, their numbers oscillated between 72 in 1928 and 320 in 1937.[38] Assessing the proportion of the Syro-Lebanese population who travelled to Iraq annually is difficult, as the figure of 4,000 entries per year may include several trips made by the same individuals. These numbers nevertheless provide a rough estimate of their numbers.

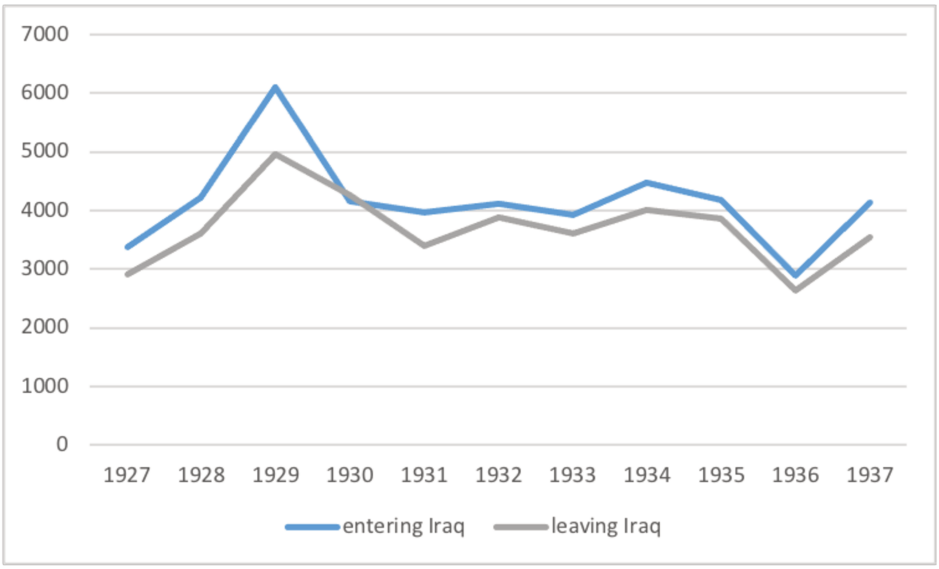

FIGURE 20: SYRIANS AND LEBANESE TRAVELLING TO AND FROM IRAQ

[37] CADN, 1SL/1/V/842, quarterly reports of the *Sûreté Générale* for the second quarter of 1928, Beirut, pp. 13–14.

[38] TNA, FO 371/24556, Statistical abstract compiled by the Iraqi Ministry of Economics, Table 24 on 'aliens entering and leaving Iraq', transmitted by Basil Newton (British Embassy) to the Department of Foreign Office, Baghdad, 31 December 1939.

Regarding Iraqis travelling to Syria and Lebanon, the statistical data that I was able to find are not as meaningful as those given above, but some figures do provide interesting insights. The statistics published by the Principal Bureau of Statistics of the Iraqi Ministry of Economics for the years 1927/1928 to 1937/1938—and transmitted to the Department of Overseas Trade by the British Embassy in Iraq—contain a table showing the number of Iraqi travellers who entered and left the country every year. For those who left Iraq, the figures ranged from 11,365 in 1927 to a peak of 17,432 in 1937, with the lowest number being 9,311 in 1931.[39] These statistics only partially capture the scale of Iraqi movements under consideration in this chapter, as they include all of the destination countries and not just Syria and Lebanon. However, it is interesting to compare them with figures in the documents produced by the French consulate in Baghdad: from 1932 to at least 1936, this consulate recorded the entries and departures of travellers at the various border posts according to their nationality. For the years 1932 and 1933, the records also make reference to Iraqis, which makes it possible to compare their numbers with those of Syrian and Lebanese travellers. The figures indicate that in 1932 and 1933 respectively, 4,150 and 4,565 Iraqis left Iraq through the border post of Ramadi, either to go to a village in the border zone or to travel to Deir ez-Zor and Damascus. Records of movements in the reverse direction reveal that the total numbers of Lebanese and Syrians who entered Iraq through the same border post in 1932 and 1933 were 3,079 and 2,915, respectively (Table 7).[40] For these two years, the figures from the Bureau of Statistics of the Iraqi Ministry of Economics, mentioned above, indicate that 12,770 and 10,336 Iraqis respectively, left their country through all border posts. Between two-thirds and half of these travellers went to Syria.

[39] TNA, FO 371/24556, Iraqi Ministry of Economics, *Statistical Abstract: For the Eleven Financial Years 1927/28–1937/38*, Table 23 (p. 12): Section 3 – Travellers to and from Iraq.
[40] CADN, 1SL/1/V/703, Statistics by nationality of travellers entering and leaving Iraq by land (1932), attached to a letter from French Consul Lépissier to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Baghdad, 31 December 1933; CADN, 1SL/1/V/1025, statistics by nationality of travellers entering and leaving Iraq by land (1933), attached to letter from Paul Lépissier to the French High Commissioner, Baghdad, 31 October 1934.

TABLE 7: TRAVELLERS ENTERING AND LEAVING IRAQ VIA OVERLAND ROUTES IN 1932 AND 1933

		Ramadi		**Mosul**		**Basra**		**Khanaqin**		**Erbil**	
		entry	exit	entry	exit	entry	exit	entry	exit	entry	exit
1932	Syrians and Lebanese	3,079	2,714	626	744	55	47	358	371	_	_
	Iraqis	4,127	4,150	1,841	1,722	3,095	2,639	3,160	3,204	_	_
1933	Syrians and Lebanese	2,915	2,621	569	524	40	14	399	447	0	0
	Iraqis	4,462	4,565	1,578	1,599	2,232	2,531	1,682	1,567	7	10

The figures presented above show that the numbers of Iraqis and of Lebanese/Syrians who travelled between Iraq and Syria during the 1930s varied between 3,000 and 5,000 annually in both directions. In assessing these figures, it is noteworthy that during the 1930s, the Syro-Lebanese population increased from about three to four million, with the urban population accounting for about 35% of the total population in Syria. In 1932, Lebanon alone had a population of 854,693.[41] Around the same period, Iraq's population was roughly the same as the combined populations of Lebanon and Syria, and its growth followed a fairly similar pattern. It increased from 2.83 million, as recorded in the 1930 census, to 3.35 million in 1932 and then to 4.24 million in 1944.[42] Thus, in the interwar period, Lebanese/Syrians and Iraqis who crossed the Syrian Desert each year represented about 1% of their countries' populations.

It should be noted that Syrians, Iraqis and Lebanese travelled mainly by land. In the interwar period, civilian air transport was still in its infancy in the Eastern Mediterranean. *Air-Union d'Orient* inaugurated a service between Marseilles and Beirut in June 1929, before establishing a Damascus–Baghdad airline at the beginning of 1930, which connected in Baghdad with Imperial Airways aircraft that flew further afield.[43] At first, the air service was used for mail as well as by some passengers, but the fare for the journey was £20 (with a 20% discount on the return ticket). In 1931, the fare was reduced to £15, with the same discount, for

[41] Philip S. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920–1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 12; Robert Widmer, 'Population', in Said B. Himadeh (ed.), *Economic Organization of Syria* (Beirut: American Press, 1936), pp. 3–8. See also Andrew Schein, 'The Relationship Between Inclusive Institutions, Proximate Causes of Growth, and Economic Growth: A Case Study of the Four Mandate Territories of Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, and TransJordan, 1918-1946/1948', *Journal of Economic Issues* 50:1 (2016), p. 106.

[42] Joseph Sassoon, *Economic Policy in Iraq, 1932–1950* (London: Frank Cass, 1987), p. 3; Peter Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq: Contriving King and Country* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), p. 205.

[43] LON, R2308/6A/20070/536, French Mandate over Syria and Lebanon: Report on the Administration of These Territories for 1929, p. 50; CADN, 1SL/1/V/703, French Consul Lépissier to the French High Commissioner, Baghdad, 26 May 1930. See also Samir Kassir, *Histoire de Beyrouth* (Paris: Perrin, 2012), pp. 363–364.

a return ticket.[44] Offering such rates, air travel competed only with the overland service of the Nairn Transport Company, which was forced to further decrease its fares in the 1930s.[45] However, while it was possible to travel between Damascus and Baghdad using commercial aircraft from the early 1930s onwards, available statistics show that local populations did not shift to that mode of transport until the eve of the Second World War and mostly after the war. According to figures sourced from the French consulate in Baghdad, 2,382 people entered and left Iraq by air in 1932. Of these travellers, 1,162 were British, 325 were French, 106 were Iraqi and only 24 were Syrians or Lebanese. The other nationalities that were heavily represented were Dutch, Americans and Germans.[46] In 1933, 3,923 Syrians and Lebanese entered Iraq by land and only 8 by air, with the same ratio applying to those who left the country.[47] As for Iraqis, they only began to use the air service in significant numbers in 1938, when it was reported that 500 of them travelled that way to Damascus and that many others could not obtain a plane seat.[48] By contrast, Syrians, Lebanese and Iraqis continued to cross the Syrian Desert by car in the interwar period. This mode of travel influenced their perception of the journey between Syria and Iraq, because they experienced space from the ground and not from the air, but also because they crossed borders, villages and varying landscapes that shaped their spatial imaginations.

Distant and Familiar Spaces in Travel Writings

As crossing the desert became easier and less time-consuming during the interwar period, many people embarked on journeys across the Syrian Desert, thereby discovering, visiting and exploring places they knew little about. This section illuminates the experiences of travellers who visited certain places in Syria and Iraq for the first time during the interwar years. In some ways, their journeys reflect some of the characteristics of those of late nineteenth century Ottoman travellers, who viewed travelling as a scientific endeavour to explore, collect data and then share that knowledge through travelogues.[49] The travel accounts examined below

[44] TNA, FO 684/7/34/3, Memorandum on transdesert traffic sent by Frank H. Todd, enclosed in a letter from British Consul Mackereth to the British consul in Baghdad, Damascus, 26 April 1934.
[45] As noted in Chapter 3, the Nairn Transport Company charged £20 in 1927, £16 in 1931 and £7.10 first class/£5.10 second class in 1934.
[46] CADN, 1SL/1/V/703, Statistics by nationality of travellers entering and leaving Iraq by air (1932), attached to a letter from the French consulate in Iraq dated 31 December 1933.
[47] CADN, 1SL/1/V/1025, Paul Lépissier to the French High Commissioner, Baghdad, 31 October 1934.
[48] NARA, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Asia, 1910–1929, microfilm roll 18, File 890G.00, 'Current Events for the Period September 16–30, 1938', the U.S. Legation in Iraq to the Secretary of State, Baghdad, 5 October 1938.
[49] Christoph Herzog and Raoul Motika, 'Orientalism "alla turca"', p. 157.

reveal a widespread desire among journalists and intellectuals to discover for themselves neighbouring districts, countries and regions that had become more accessible to them with the development of motorised transport, refusing to rely solely on knowledge derived from old books and European writings. As such, their travel accounts testify to the appropriation of new travel opportunities by people who sought to visit once-distant places and to make them known to their readers. In a way, both travelling and travel writing helped to make familiar what lay on the other side of the desert. In their accounts, the journalists described in detail the places they visited; they explained how travelling challenged the preconceived ideas they had about these places, made comparisons between 'there' and 'here' and highlighted what seemed familiar and what seemed foreign to them. In a sense, travelling 'produced and transformed their own sense of self and other, home, and frontier'.[50] By exploring these 'ambivalent' effects of travel, which both create bonds and reveal differences, this section builds on the works of various scholars who have examined how travellers were confronted with themselves and with the Other through travelling practices during the Ottoman period, such as *riḥla*, the pilgrimage to Mecca and journeys in search of knowledge (*ṭalab al-'ilm*).[51]

Like travel accounts, maps published in newspapers helped to shape the spatial imagination of readers.[52] The map shown below (Figure 21) was published in 1937 in the Iraqi newspaper, *Al-Bilad,* reprinted from the British newspaper *Modern Transport*.[53] It represents the rail and motor routes crisscrossing Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and parts of Iran, thereby visually depicting the networks and nodes that shaped a regional space transcending the borders of nation-states. A point to note is that national borders were not represented on this map, thus reflecting a desire to emphasise fluidity and mobility rather than territories. While this map was a British production, its publication in an Iraqi newspaper helped give meaning to a regional space spanning the Syrian Desert for the Arab readership of *Al-Bilad*. As we shall see below, newspapers played a role in shaping representations of both nationally bounded and regionally opened spaces.

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[50] Roxanne L. Euben *Journeys to the Other Shore: Muslim and Western Travelers in Search of Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 7.

[51] Quote from Abderrahmane El Moudden, 'The Ambivalence of Rihla: Community Integration and Self-Definition in Moroccan Travel Accounts, 1300-1800', in Dale F. Eickelman and James Piscatori (eds.), *Muslim Travellers: Pilgrimage, Migration and the Religious Imagination* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 69–84. See also Roxanne L. Euben *Journeys to the Other Shore*; Hala Fattah, 'Representations of Self and the Other in Two Iraqi Travelogues of the Ottoman Period', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 30:1 (1998), pp. 51–76.

[52] As noted and demonstrated by Daniel Foliard, 'Maps are not only forms of knowledge, but also processes as well as performances, which thereby reveal assumptions and, in turn, shape reality.' See Daniel Foliard, *Dislocating the Orient: British Maps and the Making of the Middle East, 1854-1921* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), p. 4.

[53] AUB, 'Wasā'il al-muwāṣalāt wa-l-naql fi al-'Irāq', *Al-Bilad*, 4 May 1937, p. 1.

FIGURE 21: MAP OF RAIL AND ROAD NETWORKS, PUBLISHED IN *AL-BILAD*.

Credit: Front page of the Baghdad newspaper *Al-Bilad* of 4 May 1937, held at the American University of Beirut, Jafet Library, Lebanon. Author not found. The university has no knowledge of the rightful owner.

Touring one's own country

Some journalists embarked on journeys that did not extend across national borders, even when they entailed crossing parts of the Syrian Desert. The issue of the Syrian newspaper, *Al-Sha'b,* published in May 1931, contained a series of travel accounts written by someone using the pseudonym of Farzat, who travelled in the northern parts of Syria. He provided a detailed social, economic and administrative portrayal of this region, while pointing out the various tourist sites worth visiting. Farzat did not travel with a company; instead he went to a garage in Damascus where a broker showed him a car, which was supposedly ready to leave for Deir ez-

Zor, but which finally left a good deal later when all the seats were filled. On the way, they stopped in Palmyra where he had the chance to visit the ruins, which he described in detail in the newspaper.[54] He spent a few days in Deir ez-Zor, which he noted was very similar to other Syrian cities, adding that the best description he could provide was the feeling, when walking around, 'as if one was in the district of al-Maydan in Damascus'. After a couple of days spent in Deir ez-Zor, Farzat decided to make an excursion along the Euphrates. He took a road trip to Mayadin and as far as Abu Kemal near the Iraqi border, passing several villages that made a strong impression on him: 'We continued our journey to the village of al-Salihin [...], which is full of ancient historical remains and ruins that give you a sense of ephemeral majesty and past glory.'[55] The author then continued his journey to al-Hasakah, describing the agriculture, trade and demography of the Jazira.[56]

Farzat's account was intended to introduce the readers of *Al-Sha'b* to this remote part of north-eastern Syria, which formed the 'territorial margins' of Mandate Syria at the time, while giving them a glimpse of the major economic development and urbanisation that this region had undergone in recent years.[57] Connections between Damascus and the Jazira had just been strengthened by the inauguration in April 1931 of a suspension bridge over the Euphrates at Deir ez-Zor, which enabled cars to travel more easily between the two banks, without the need to take a ferry. Work on the new bridge had begun on the eve of World War I and was resumed under the French administration after the war, but several floods in April 1928 and 1929 had destroyed the foundations and greatly delayed the completion of the bridge. In May 1931, the correspondent of *Al-Sha'b* in Deir ez-Zor gave a detailed account of the ceremony held to inaugurate the bridge, pointing to the speech of the mayor who praised this great project that would facilitate the movement of people between the two Syrian banks of the Euphrates.[58] The Damascene newspaper evidently intended to create representations of an increasingly integrated Syrian national space for its readers.

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[54] AUB, Farzat, 'Riḥlat al-rabī': jawla mā bayna al-nahrayn (1)', *Al-Sha'b*, 4 May 1931, p. 1.
[55] AUB, Farzat, 'Riḥlat al-rabī': jawla mā bayna al-nahrayn (2)', *Al-Sha'b*, 12 May 1931, p. 1.
[56] AUB, Farzat, 'Riḥlat al-rabī': jawla mā bayna al-nahrayn (3)', *Al-Sha'b*, 18 May 1931, p. 1.
[57] Quote: Jordi Tejel Gorgas, 'Les territoires de marge de la Syrie mandataire: le mouvement autonomiste de la Haute Jazîra, paradoxes et ambiguïtés d'une intégration « nationale » inachevée (1936-1939)', *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* No. 126 (2009), pp. 205–222.
[58] TNA, AIR 23/290, Report on a Tour: Mardin–Aleppo–Deir ez-Zor–Mosul, Administrative Inspector, Mosul, 5 June 1928; TNA, FO 371/14553, British Consul Monck-Mason to the Foreign Office, Aleppo, 18 December 1929; TNA, FO 424/633, Memorandum concerning a journey to Mosul written by Acting Consul Meade, Aleppo, 12 July 1930; AUB, 'Risālat Dayr al-Zur: ḥaflat tadshīn al-jisr', *Al-Sha'b*, 11 May 1931, p. 2.

Similarly, some Iraqi journalists and intellectuals travelled around Iraq and published accounts of their travels to introduce their readers to different parts of the country.[59] In 1925, ʻAbd al-Razzaq al-Hasani, a journalist working for the short-lived newspaper, *Al-Mufid* (1922–1924), published a book based on numerous working trips that he had undertaken to investigate the newspaper's circulation throughout Iraq and to appoint representatives outside Baghdad. Travelling and writing about travel were two closely related practices for al-Hasani, who stated in the introduction to his book that it would be of great use to readers, as it was 'based on seeing and witnessing rather than on reading or listening'.[60] Al-Hasani envisioned Iraq as a nationally bounded space, devoting various chapters of his book to the country's geography and history, its railways and roads, its economy as well as its historical sites. In the section on transport and communication routes, he recounted his travels to the four corners of Iraq, from Basra to Mosul and from Ramadi to Khanaqin, indicating how long these trips would have taken in Ottoman times. In his view, Iraq had now become a coherent whole: 'It is clear from what we have mentioned above that the Iraqi lands have become, thanks to the cars, like a chain whose rings are connected to each other [...].'[61] Thus, some journalists and intellectuals evidently endeavoured to explore their country and published travel accounts in order to make it better known to their fellow citizens, thus contributing to the emergence of the national space through practices of travel and cultural production.

Explorations beyond state borders

Similarly, other people (and sometimes the same individuals) travelled between Syria and Iraq, and more generally across the borders of the post-Ottoman states, driven by the same desire to discover and acquire first-hand knowledge and pass it on in travelogues. On 1 July 1931, ʻAli Saydu Gurani, Secretary of the Legislative Council of Transjordan, left Amman on a journey of several weeks that took him through Damascus and Baghdad. He then visited and explored the Kurdish regions of northern Iraq at length, returning via Deir ez-Zor and Palmyra and reaching Damascus in mid-August. As he explained in the introduction to a travelogue that he published in 1939, he decided to visit Iraqi Kurdistan in order to see for himself the social and cultural life of the Kurds. He wanted to 'ascertain' what he had read about the Kurds and

[59] See, for example, the detailed picture of Basra provided by Yunis Bahri in *Al-Bilad* on 7 July 1930. AUB, 'Rasā'il al-sā'iḥ al-'irāqī fī-l-ṭarīq ilā-l-Kuwayt', *Al-Bilad*, 7 July 1930, p. 2.
[60] 'Abd al-Razzaq al-Hasani, *Riḥla fī-l-'Irāq, aw, khāṭirāt al-Ḥasanī* (Baghdad: Al-maṭba'a al-'aṣriyya, 1925), p. 9. In the original Arabic: 'mabnī 'alā-l-mushāhada wa-l-'iyān lā 'alā-l-qirā'a wa-l-samā' […].'
[61] Ibid., p. 46. In the original Arabic: '[...] 'anna al-bilād al-'irāqiyya aṣbaḥat bi-faḍl al-sayyārāt ka-silsila marbūtat al-ḥalaqāt ba'duhā bi-ba'd [...].'

their country in 'the books of Westerners, British and Americans'. His aim was to explore northern Iraq—just like 'Westerners' who shared a 'love for exploration'—and provide a 'true picture' of the social and cultural life of the Kurds, different from what could be found in existing books written about them.[62] Apart from the observations he made about the Kurds, 'Ali Saydu Gurani also shared the impressions he had while visiting Iraq for the first time. One of the first things he noted upon arriving in Baghdad after crossing the desert was that he had much difficulty understanding the hotel doorman and others because of the peculiarities of the Baghdadi dialect. The reason, he explained, was that over time, words from 'Near and Middle Eastern' languages, as well as from English, had been incorporated and mixed together.[63] Further on in the travelogue, he noted that while wandering around in Palmyra on the return journey, he realised that the dialect of the inhabitants was becoming less Iraqi and more Syrian.[64] Other travellers too noticed similarities and differences when crossing the desert.

In December 1928, Tawfiq Jana, the editor of the Damascus newspaper, *Al-Sha'b*, undertook a trip through Syria and Iraq, crossing the desert between Deir ez-Zor and Ramadi. He reported on his journey in an article titled 'Journey to Iraq' (*riḥlat al-'Irāq*).[65] While discussing at length the conditions of his journey, he also commented on the Iraqi villages he passed through, comparing them with Syrian villages. 'Anah is an Iraqi village on the Iraqi border', he noted, 'and we know it is Iraqi because of its palm trees, inasmuch as we have not encountered any Syrian village with a single palm tree before […].' He went on to describe Anah in detail to give the readers of *Al-Sha'b* a picture of this first Iraqi village: its location between the hill and the river, its cultivable land, its textile production, the number of inhabitants and their great poverty. In Ramadi, he walked in the evening through the souks, which he found familiar: 'They are no different from the souks of some of our small villages.' He added that there was nothing important to see in Ramadi, except the customs building. As for the *serai* (administrative building), he found that it 'did not equal the *serai* of the smallest *qaḍā'* [administrative unit] in Syria.'[66] In sum, Tawfiq Jana pointed out similarities and differences between Syrian and Iraqi towns and villages, expressing mixed feelings of familiarity and distance. Although he presented Iraq as a space distinct from Syria, his frequent

[62] Introduction by 'Ali Saydu Gurani, dated 21 September 1938, in 'Ali Saydu Gurani, *Min 'Ammān ilā al-'Imādiyya, aw, Jawlah fī Kurdistān al-janūbiyya* (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-sa'āda, 1939), pp. 2–3.
[63] Ibid., p. 20.
[64] Ibid., p. 185.
[65] AUB, 'Riḥlat al-'Irāq (4): fī-l-ṭarīq ilā Baghdād', *Al-Sha'b*, 11 December 1928, p. 2.
[66] Ibid.

comparisons also helped to make Iraqi cities 'knowable and familiar' to his readers and consequently less distant and alien to them.[67]

Journalists also crossed the Syrian Desert to attend regional exhibitions and fairs, which became increasingly frequent during the interwar period. In April 1932, Baghdad was the site of a major agricultural and industrial fair, which showcased Iraq's and neighbouring countries' latest achievements in the fields of industry and agriculture. On this occasion, the Iraqi government invited prominent newspaper editors from neighbouring countries to Baghdad, resulting in the gathering of a large delegation of journalists who covered the exhibition and wrote about Iraq and their journey in their respective newspapers. Among them were the Lebanese journalists 'Ali Nasir al-Din and Najib Liyan as well as Ma'ruf Arna'ut, editor of *Fata al-'Arab* (in Damascus), 'Issa al-'Issa, editor of *Filastin* (in Jaffa) and Munif al-Husayni, editor of *Al-Jami'a al-'Arabiyya* (in Haifa). Apart from the journalists who travelled together by car from Damascus, there were two representatives of the Egyptian press, Sa'd Dagher and Sami al-Sarraj, who arrived in Baghdad by plane. Iraqi journalists welcomed them in Baghdad and showed them around the city.[68] The Baghdad Agricultural and Industrial Fair followed other similar exhibitions and paved the way for more fairs that would be held throughout the post-Ottoman Middle East in the years to come. After visiting this fair and the 1932 Paris Colonial Exhibition, 'Issa al-'Issa was inspired to organise an Arab Exhibition in Palestine, which was eventually held in July 1933.[69] Damascus also hosted a large industrial fair in September 1929, organised by the Syrian Ministry of Agriculture and Trade, which was attended by around 120,000 people.[70] Another large fair was held in Damascus from May to August 1936, but it drew fewer people than the organisers had hoped.[71]

The 1932 Baghdad Agricultural and Industrial Fair not only gave journalists the opportunity to make contacts with their colleagues from neighbouring Arab countries but it also

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[67] Quote: Ellen Furlough, 'Une leçon des choses: Tourism, Empire, and the Nation in Interwar France', *French Historical Studies* 25:3 (2002), pp. 456–457. Similarly, Ellen Furlough shows that French guidebooks presented certain places in the colonies (e.g., the Algerian coast) by comparing them to places known to their readers (e.g., the Côte d'Azur), thus helping to make these places familiar and desirable.

[68] The National Library of Israel [NLI], 'Wafd al-ṣaḥāfa al-'arabiyya li-ziyarat al-ma'raḍ al-zirā'ī Baghdād', *Filastin*, 5 April 1932, p. 3. https://www.nli.org.il/en/discover/newspapers/arabic-press (accessed 5 June 2022); AUB, ''Awdat wafd al-ṣaḥāfa al-'arabiyya', *Al-Bayraq*, 14 April 1932, p. 1.

[69] Nadi Abusaada, 'Self-Portrait of a Nation: The Arab Exhibition in Mandate Jerusalem, 1931-34', *Jerusalem Quarterly* No. 77 (2019), pp. 124–125.

[70] Frank Peter, *Les entrepreneurs de Damas : nation, impérialisme et industrialisation* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2010), p. 102.

[71] CADN, 1SL/1/V/1026, 'Nouvelles Diverses', the French Legation to the delegate general of the French High Commissioner, Baghdad, 26 May 1936, referring to an extract from *Al-Bilad* of 21 May 1936; Jane Priestland (ed.) *Records of Syria* (London: Archives Edition, 2005), Volume 5, p. 772: 'Economic Conditions in Lebanon and Syria during the Quarter ended June 30, 1936'; Ibid., p. 587: Damascus Quarterly Report, July 1st to September 20, 1936, transmitted by the British consul to the Foreign Office, Damascus, 3 October 1936.

enabled some of them to visit Baghdad for the first time and to discover that their representations of the city did not correspond to the reality. In his introduction to his travel narrative, published in *Al-Jami'a al-'Arabiyya* as a twelve-part serial, the journalist, Munif al-Husayni, explained that he had long hoped to visit Baghdad but had not previously had the opportunity to do so. On 28 March 1932, he left Jerusalem and travelled to Haifa and Beirut, where he booked a seat with the Syrian company, Debosh & Akkash, to make the trip from Beirut to Baghdad.[72] Upon arriving in Baghdad, al-Husayni realised the discrepancy between the city he was discovering and his own expectations and how he had imagined it. While Europeans arrived filled with images of Baghdad drawn from the *Arabian Nights*, he said, he himself was steeped in ancient literature about 'the city of the Abbasid caliphs'.[73] As he explained in the first article of the series, written from Damascus, his desire to visit Baghdad was inspired by books on Islamic history. Reading classical Arabic literature had also filled him with other imaginings of Baghdad. Before arriving in the city , he repeated the verses of the eighth-century Baghdad poet, Al-Buhturi, to himself. It was 'through the eyes of Al-Buhturi', al-Husayni admitted, through the poet's descriptions of Baghdad, that he envisioned the city. It was thus 'a great shock' when he got there: 'It is better for the Arab who visits Baghdad for the first time', he advised his readers, 'to remember, before arriving there, the disasters that have affected [the city], and how it has been transformed by the episodes that took place from its destruction at the hands of the Tatars until the end of the Great War […].'[74] The city was as grand as ever, he confided, but there were hardly any remnants of the Abbasid era that he had been so eager to see.

His colleague from the Jaffa newspaper, *Filastin*, expressed similar sentiments. Having described in detail his journey through the desert[75], 'Issa al-'Issa published an account of his stay in Iraq as a serial titled 'My Observations in Baghdad' (*Mushāhadāti fī Baghdād*). In one of these articles, he explained that when King Faysal asked him how had he found Baghdad, he told him that he did not think that the city resembled the Baghdad of the *Arabian Nights*. 'I was imagining it with what I have read about its history and the descriptions of its palaces', he wrote. But what he saw when he got to Iraq impressed him just as much. Coming from Damascus, he wrote, the travellers first passed through great expanses of cultivated land, which contrasted with the desert that they had just passed through. After crossing the railway line,

[72] The story of his journey between Beirut, Damascus and Baghdad is told in the second and third articles in the series, published in the tenth and eleventh issues in April 1932.
[73] Munif al-Husayni, 'Bayna al-Quds wa Baghdād (4)', *Al-Jami'a al-'Arabiyya*, 21 April 1932, p. 1.
[74] Ibid.
[75] He spoke in detail about the argument they had with representatives of the company, Debosh & Akkash.

they entered Baghdad, where old houses and narrow lanes stood next to modern buildings, the impressive Maude Bridge and wide avenues. Al-'Issa was surprised by the intense activity of construction and thought that people who were visiting Baghdad in 1932 after visited it ten years earlier would not believe their eyes.[76]

Al-Husayni and Al-'Issa were not the only Arab travellers to know Baghdad only through ancient texts before they visited it, as evidenced by the memoirs of the Damascene jurist and intellectual, Muhammad 'Ali al-Tantawi (1909–1999), whom we met in the previous chapter through his account of the 1935 expedition from Damascus to Medina. He travelled for the first time from Damascus to Baghdad in 1936. In a travelogue published in 1956, he recounted that on arriving in Baghdad after crossing the desert, he saw the first palm trees and became excited at the thought of seeing Baghdad, scrolling through his mind the images he had of the ancient city of the Caliph al-Mansur.[77] In his memoirs, he also recounted how little he knew about Baghdad when he arrived there:

> I went to Baghdad, and I knew nothing about it except its past. I didn't know what contemporary Bagdad was. What were Al-Rasafa, Al-Karkh and Al-Karrada?[78] And I didn't know anything about the people in Baghdad. What were their peculiarities? Their nature? What did they know, what did they not know? What did they love and what did they hate? [...] What I knew of Baghdad was its past; and Baghdad of the past is an enchanted paradise among dream paradises; [it is] the materialisation of a night from the *Thousand and One Nights*.[79]

Many travellers from Bilad al-Sham had very limited knowledge of Baghdad at the beginning of the twentieth century; what they knew was restricted to descriptions given by writers of the Abbasid period (eighth–thirteenth centuries) or to an imaginary derived from classical Arabic literature. In this context, crossing the Syrian Desert enabled them to see Baghdad and Iraq differently but also to experience similarities and differences between the places visited and those they knew. Writing about their journey was also a way to make Iraq familiar to their readers.

Sightseeing

In August 1932, a contributor to the Syrian newspaper, *Al-Qabas,* wrote an article on archaeological tourism (*al-siyāḥa al-athariyya*) in Syria in which he lamented that despite

[76] 'Issa al-'Issa, 'Mushāhadāti fī Baghdād (2)', *Filastin*, 27 April 1932, p. 2. https://www.nli.org.il/en/discover/newspapers/arabic-press (accessed 5 June 2022).
[77] ʿAli al-Tantawi, *Baghdād: Dhikrayyāt wa mushāhadāt*, (Damascus: Al-Maktaba al-Azhariyya, 1960), pp. 20–21.
[78] Neighborhoods in Baghdad.
[79] ʿAli al-Tantawi, *Dhikrayyāt ʿAlī al-Ṭanṭāwī: Vol. 3* (Jeddah: Dār al-Manāra, 1986), pp. 241–242.

constant new archaeological discoveries, Syrians did not know these sites and did not visit them. According to him, some intellectuals claimed that there was nothing interesting to see in the country, even though Syria was full of Greek, Egyptian, Roman and Arab remains. He regretted that these intellectuals had very limited knowledge of these sites and that the knowledge they did have came from reading 'Western books' (*kutub al-gharb*) rather than from visiting these places personally.[80] In a sense, the author echoed the prevailing French discourse on the alleged lack of interest of Syrians in historical remains. Indeed, many French commentators considered that only foreigners engaged in tourism in Syria and Lebanon, whereas Arab travellers limited themselves to summering.[81] This view was also reflected in the French colonial discourse of '*mise en valeur*' (development) and its educational mission to justify the Mandate in Syria and Lebanon, as the French claimed that they were developing historical sites and strengthening the 'taste for art and antiquities' of the population.[82] However, this assumption overlooks the fact that Arab travellers were visiting archaeological sites and, above all, that this was a time during which tourism was being actively promoted in newspapers, travelogues and guidebooks in Arabic. The above-mentioned article in *Al-Qabas* reflects a prevailing press discourse that aimed at encouraging people to travel and go sightseeing in and beyond their country. Likewise, various guides were published in the interwar period to promote travel and tourism. In addition to the prolific production of guidebooks in French and English, these years witnessed the publication of several guides in Arabic that focused on summering but also on travelling as a way of experiencing places that embodied past histories and peoples.

Sightseeing featured prominently in the 1934 *Guide of Summering and Tourism in Lebanon and Syria* published by the Egyptian professor and businessman, Iskandar Yared, who owned a travel agency in Cairo.[83] He himself had travelled several times to both countries, notably in 1930 and 1931 in the company of a group of Egyptians, to which we shall return later. As indicated in the foreword, the guidebook was intended for distribution in Egypt, Sudan, Palestine, Syria, Iraq and other Arab countries.[84] It provided practical information about

[80] AUB, 'Al-siyāha al-athariyya', *Al-Qabas*, 10 August 1932, p. 1.
[81] Haut-Commissariat de la République française en Syrie et au Liban, *La Syrie et le Liban sous l'occupation et le mandat français*, 1919–1927 (Nancy : Berger Levrault, 1929), p. 274; Roger de Gontaut-Biron, *Sur les routes de Syrie après neuf ans de mandat* (Paris: Plon, 1928), pp. 7–8; Richard Thoumin, *Géographie humaine de la Syrie centrale* (Paris: Leroux, 1936), p. 201.
[82] Quoted in Idir Ouahes, S*yria and Lebanon under the French Mandate: Cultural Imperialism and the Workings of Empire* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018), pp. 66–68, here: p. 68. On a similar discourse with regard to Algeria, see Ellen Furlough, 'Une leçon des choses', p. 456.
[83] Shams al-Din al-'Ajlani, 'Dimashq fī ʿuyūn miṣriyya', 4 February 2012 (accessed 5 June 2022). https://alazmenah.com/?page=show_det&id=33802&category_id=14.
[84] Iskandar Yared, *Dalīl al-iṣṭiyyāf wa-l-siyāha fī Sūriya wa Lubnān* (Beirut: Maṭba'at rawḍat al-funūn, 1934).

transport and accommodation and described various tourist sites and summer resorts in both countries. As scholars have widely shown, guidebooks help to shape the practice of tourism, as they not only provide practical details but they also suggest and even prescribe which places to visit and how to visit them.[85] Iskandar Yared pointed out numerous places in Lebanon and Syria which he considered to be sites worth visiting, such as the remains in Baalbek and Palmyra, the *norias* (water wheels) in Hama, the Citadel of Aleppo, the Umayyad Mosque, the 'Azm Palace and the craft industry in Damascus, to name but a few. The tours recommended in his guidebook were no different from those featuring in French and English guidebooks.[86] Notably, the cover image of Yared's guidebook reflects a vision of archaeological tourism as a travelling practice of Europeans. It depicts a European woman tourist standing next to a car in front of the ruins of Palmyra. Travel between Baghdad and Damascus had now become easy, according to the guidebook, which gave details of the two weekly convoys plying the desert in both directions.[87] Consequently, an increasing number of Iraqi notables were travelling westwards during the holydays. Although they mainly went to Lebanon to spend the warm season in the summer resorts, Yared opined that the trip to Syria and Lebanon nevertheless offered an opportunity to visit historical and archaeological sites. Beirut was presented in the guide as a very convenient place to stay, as it enabled visitors to combine their seasonal retreat with different excursions through Lebanon and Syria.[88]

Iskandar Yared's guidebook had a clear prescriptive and even political dimension. As he stated in the foreword, his guidebook was intended to 'strengthen the moral and economic ties between Syria and Lebanon, on the one hand, and the brothers and friends in Palestine, Egypt, Iraq, and [other] Arab countries, on the other'.[89] This utilitarian approach to travel was shared in the interwar years by many who saw the development of transport and communication, in general, and the growth of transdesert mobility, in particular, as a means of bringing together the Arab populations of the post-Ottoman states. In this context, sightseeing was often included in official and semi-official tours, as will become apparent in the following section.

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[85] Scholars have amply demonstrated that guidebooks, such as Murray and Baedeker's guides of the nineteenth century, shaped what 'ought to be seen' by limiting descriptions to certain sites and circuits. See, for example, Rudy Koshar, ''What Ought to Be Seen': Tourists' Guidebooks and National Identities in Modern Germany and Europe', *Journal of Contemporary History* 33:4 (July 1998), pp. 323–340; Eric G.E. Zuelow, *A History of Modern Tourism* (London: Palgrave, 2016), pp. 77–80.
[86] See Chapter 5.
[87] Iskandar Yared, *Dalīl al-iṣṭiyyāf wa-l-siyāha fī Sūriya wa Lubnān*, p. 104.
[88] Ibid., pp. 134–135.
[89] Ibid., Foreword.

Travelling as a Political Endeavour

The increased opportunities to travel across the Syrian Desert were taken advantage of by many people who encouraged and organised group tours in order to forge cultural, social and political links across the borders of the post-Ottoman states. Increased connections across the Syrian Desert served the proponents of pan-Arab ideas, which gained ground during the interwar period. Although the idea of Arab solidarity based on a common language and culture had already emerged in the nineteenth century, it was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that Arab nationalism (*qawmiyya*) took shape as an ideology and political movement. In a context marked by the break-up of the Ottoman Empire, the disappearance of certain common references, such as the caliphate, and the formation of territorial states under French and British administrations, many Arab intellectuals advocated the existence of an Arab nation pre-existing any state. Resting on the idea of a shared sense of belonging based on a common language and culture, Arab nationalism was ultimately aimed at the constitution of an Arab political unity.[90] This should not be seen, however, as a homogeneous and coherent framework of references, as Peter Wien points out. 'Rather, there is a conglomerate of sometimes contradictory, sometimes complementary Arab nationalisms that take different forms in the different Arab lands and are deeply rooted in local contexts.'[91]

While the interwar years, and more particularly the 1930s, witnessed the rise of Arab nationalism, this period was also characterised by various overlapping and competing ideological frameworks. Syrian nationalists, for example, formulated the project of a Greater Syria, whose territorial limits would be based on the conjunction of history and geography. Antun Saadeh, the founder of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, even claimed that Syrian territory could extend to Cyprus and Iraq.[92] Pan-Islamic nationalism also offered a competing frame of reference, even if it was still in its infancy.[93] But most importantly, Arab nationalisms were concomitant with different forms of territorial or state-based nationalism (*waṭaniyya*), which advanced more exclusive national allegiances based on the territory of a single country and often laid claim to a national heritage rooted in a non-Arab and non-Islamic past, for

[90] Leyla Dakhli, 'Arabisme, nationalisme arabe et identifications transnationales arabes au 20e siècle', *Vingtième Siecle. Revue d'histoire* 103:3 (2009), pp. 12–25; Adeed Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Philip S. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920-1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 434–464.
[91] Peter Wien, *Arab Nationalism*, p. 3.
[92] Nicolas Dot-Pouillard, 'Sur les frontières : le Parti syrien national social entre idéologie unitaire et États-nations' in Pierre-Jean Luizard and Anne-Marie Bozzo (eds.), *Vers un nouveau Moyen-Orient? Etats arabes en crise entre logiques de division et sociétés civiles* (Rome: Roma Tre-Press, 2016), pp. 209–226; Christopher Solomon, *In Search of Greater Syria: The History and Politics of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2022).
[93] Leyla Dakhli, 'Arabisme, nationalisme arabe et identifications transnationales arabes au 20e siècle', pp. 19–20.

example, Phoenician or Mesopotamian.[94] To be sure, *qawmī* and *waṭanī* discourses and identifications were not necessarily mutually exclusive. Moreover, the temporal context is important for understanding both forms of nationalism. As Cyrus Schayegh has shown, whereas these two national movements were embryonic in the 1920s, the 1930s witnessed the 'maturation of nation-states' and the consolidation of *waṭanī* movements on the one hand and the development of transnational bonds and strengthening of '*qawmi* affinities' on the other hand.[95]

During the interwar period, Iraq became a hotbed of Arab nationalism, most notably under the influence of the thinker, Sati al-Husri, who was also the Minister of Education. In the newly formed Iraqi kingdom, al-Husri worked to develop and spread the ideas and language of Arab nationalism through education and history. Arab nationalism also gained ground in Syria and Palestine, although in different political contexts. In Syria, for example, the urban political elite of the National Bloc were mainly concerned with strengthening their position vis-à-vis the French and working towards independence. However, a new middle-class generation showed more commitment to Arab unity in the 1930s.[96] Alongside these forms of urban nationalism, 'popular notions of Syrian-Arab identity' also emerged in the course of the Great Syrian Revolt.[97] Meanwhile, the inclusion of Egypt within the Arab nation was a matter of debate among Arab nationalists in the 1930s. Moreover, in Egypt, Arab nationalism came up against a strong attachment of intellectuals to Egyptian and Islamic national sentiments. From the mid-1930s, however, intellectuals and officials from Iraq and Egypt began to forge closer ties. Yet, although this movement gained momentum in the early 1940s, even the most zealous advocates of Egypt's Arab character continued to support 'cultural, spiritual and scientific unity' but not political unity.[98]

In a context characterised by the rise of Arab nationalism, travel was endowed by certain actors with the potential to bring people together across a vast and blurred Arab/Islamic region that they hoped would become unified. In the 1930s, many students, scouts, intellectuals and

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[94] Adeed Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, p. 98; Aline Schlaepfer, *Les intellectuels juifs de Bagdad: Discours et allégeances (1908-1951)* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2016), pp. 9–10, 88–90.
[95] Cyrus Schayegh, *The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World*, pp. 132–191, 200–265.
[96] Leyla Dakhli, 'Arabisme, nationalisme arabe et identifications transnationales arabes au 20e siècle', pp. 12–25; Adeed Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*. On the adoption of a nationalist discourse by the Damascene urban elite, see Peter Wien, *Arab Nationalism*, p. 123.
[97] Michael Provence, *The Great Syrian Revolt and the Rise of Arab Nationalism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), here: p. 151.
[98] Sylvia Haim, *Arab Nationalism: An Anthology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962), pp. 45–53, here: p. 52. See also Adeed Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, pp. 81–82; Israel Gershoni and James Jankowski, *Redefining the Egyptian Nation 1930–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 35–53.

politicians took part in organised trips, travelling between Iraq and Syria through the desert, often as part of a larger tour that included people from various countries bordering the Syrian Desert and even Egypt. In its examination of these travelling practices, the following section does not seek to prove the relevance of a regional space beyond national borders and the Syrian Desert; rather, it aims to demonstrate the performative use of transdesert travel by some actors with pan-Arab inclinations.

Students and scouts

In the interwar period, the American University of Beirut (AUB) attracted many young Arabs from neighbouring countries, who studied in Beirut before returning home to work for their respective governments. From 1921 onwards, the Iraqi government even sent bursary students to AUB to be trained as teachers. The years spent abroad were more than a training period for these students, as AUB was also a place where they met, interacted and connected with their peers from neighbouring countries. This shared experience left its marks, as Hilary Falb Kalisman has shown. The time spent by Iraqis in Beirut was akin to 'an intellectual pilgrimage which forged a community of national belonging across the proto-national boundaries of the Mandates'.[99] In a sense, these students forged transnational bonds during their time at AUB in the same way that the last generation of Ottoman civil servants and officers acquired a shared consciousness while studying in Istanbul.[100] Whereas the time spent on campus facilitated the building of lasting bonds among AUB students, the spring and summer breaks also offered them the opportunity to travel and get to know the countries surrounding the Syrian Desert. For example, in the summer of 1925, following their completion of their first-year exams, two Iraqi students from Mosul, Muhammad Hadid and Najib Sabunji, returned to Iraq via Damascus, where they halted for a few days at a friend's house and visited the city. They then continued their journey with the Nairn Transport Company to Baghdad, which they visited for the first time, before travelling by car, one week later, to Mosul. The following year, the two friends travelled to Palestine during the summer break.[101]

[99] Hilary Falb Kalisman, 'Bursary Scholars at the American University of Beirut: Living and Practising Arab Unity', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 42:4 (2015), pp. 599–617, here: p. 617. On the AUB as an arena for students' activism and the emergence of an Arab identity, see Betty S. Anderson, *The American University of Beirut: Arab Nationalism and Liberal Education* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), pp. 119–150.
[100] Michael Provence, *The Last Ottoman Generation and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 9–55.
[101] AUB's archival collections at the Jafet Memorial Library, Student Life 1882–1980s (AA:4.3), Box 1, File 3: Iraqi Students, 1926. See also Ahmad Soussa, *Ḥayātī fī niṣf qarn* (Baghdad, Dār al-shu'ūn al-thaqāfiyya al-'āmat, 1986), p. 159.

The university holidays were also a time for taking study trips in which both students and faculty participated. In early 1936, the Iraqi Student Society of AUB began preparations for organising a tour to Iraq for the upcoming spring break in which not only Iraqi students but also foreign students and some professors would participate. The Society contacted Iraqi ministers to request assistance, and received the support of the government of Iraq in the organisation of this trip.[102] This trip provided the Iraqi government with an opportunity to strengthen its ties with AUB and to introduce Iraq to the university's students and professors. On the morning of 8 August 1936, a delegation from AUB arrived in Baghdad in five cars and was welcomed by Iraqi officials. A journalist from *Al-Bilad* took part in the excursion, which assumed an official and formal character, and reported on it in the newspaper.[103] The group was also accompanied by the Iraqi writer and traveller Yunis Bahri, referred to as 'the Iraqi tourist/traveller' (*al-sā'iḥ al-'irāqī*). His presence in the group was striking, as he was a strong advocate of Iraqi tourism both at home and abroad. For the historian, Nils Riecken, Yunis Bahri was an 'actor of globalization,' as his intellectual contribution transcended borders and connected places across different states and empires.[104] While promoting Iraq as a tourist destination for Europeans and Americans, Bahri also tried to inspire his Iraqi compatriots and fellow Arabs to travel around their country and discover surrounding regions. The AUB delegation toured areas south of Baghdad and was welcomed at each stop by different officials. From Baghdad, the group first drove to Babel, where they took many photographs of the remains, before continuing their journey to visit Hilla, Kufa and Najaf. There, the journalist recounted, the *kaymakam* (governor), in his welcome speech, begged them to remember Iraq and to speak well of it in their talks and writings. After a final visit to Karbala, they returned to Baghdad before travelling back to Beirut.[105]

In April 1939, another group of students from AUB travelled to Iraq for a week-long tour of the country as guests of the Iraqi government. The university staff responsible for organising the trip approached the U.S. consul in Baghdad to request assistance in this task. The students were all members of *al-Urwa al-Wuthqa*, an AUB student society that was heavily involved in the promotion of pan-Arabism.[106] In Baghdad, the students met with Prime Minister Nuri al-Said, who praised their endeavour to 'unite the ranks of Arab nations', in the words of

[102] AUB, 'Al-ṭullāb al-'irāqiyyun wa jāmi'at Bayrūt al-amrīkiyya yaqūmūn bi-riḥla fī anḥā' al-'Irāq', *Al-Bilad*, 24 January 1936, p. 4.
[103] AUB, 'Riḥlat wafd jāmi'at Beirut ilā-l-Furāt al-awsaṭ', *Al-Bilad*, 10 April 1936, p. 5.
[104] Nils Riecken, 'How to Read German State Archives Differently: The Case of the "Iraqi Traveller" Yūnis Baḥrī (ca. 1901-1979) in a Global Frame', *ZMO Working Papers*, No. 18 (2017), p. 9.
[105] AUB, 'Riḥlat wafd jāmi'at Bayrūt ilā al-Furāt al-awsaṭ', *Al-Bilad*, 10 April 1936, p. 5.
[106] Betty S. Anderson, *The American University of Beirut*, pp. 2 and 114.

the American ambassador.[107] However, AUB students were not the only ones to travel across and beyond the Syrian Desert. In the second half of the 1930s, many similar study tours were organised, often encouraged by government officials. In early 1935, a group of Iraqi students and professors applied to the General Directorate of Education for permission to organise a trip to Turkey during the upcoming spring holidays. After examining their request, however, the General Directorate replied that they would be allowed instead to visit the Hijaz in order to strengthen ties between Iraq and the Hijaz, offering them the opportunity to participate in one of the first Iraqi student trips to this country, following the recently opened overland pilgrimage route between Najaf and Medina.[108] The following year in February 1936, a group of twenty-four Iraqi law students and eight aspiring faculty left Baghdad and embarked on a journey to Syria, Palestine and Egypt. Before they left on their tour of Arab countries, various professors and political figures, notably Prime Minister Yasin al-Hashimi, delivered speeches in which they wished them well.[109]

Travelling was also a practice closely associated with the scouting troops. In the 1920s, youth organisations were formed in the post-Ottoman Arab countries and gained increasing prominence during the following decade. During the interwar years, nationalist elites in the various French and British mandate states saw scouting as a way to promote independence, national sentiments and physical fitness among youth. Thus, scouting movements were often in confrontation with the Mandate powers.[110] Travelling through their own country enabled the scouts to become familiar with it, both by meeting people and by gaining spatial representations of it. In Syria, the burgeoning scouting movement developed a form of 'scout tourism' in the interwar period.[111] In Iraq, the scouts also visited different regions of their country. Moreover, the various scouting troops travelled between Iraq and Syria as well as throughout the post-Ottoman Arab countries, thereby forging cultural and political links across national boundaries. As Samuel Dolbee has pointed out, the different scouting troops active in Iraq, Syria, Palestine

[107] NARA, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Asia, 1910–1929, microfilm roll 18, File 890G.00, Press review and report on events for the period 1–15 April 1939 written by U.S. Consul Knabenshue, Baghdad, 27 April 1939.
[108] AUB, 'Al-Mu'allimūn wa-l-ṭullāb yaftatiḥūn ṭarīq al-ḥajj al-jadīd', *Al-Bilad*, 31 January 1935, p. 4.
[109] AUB, 'Riḥlat shabāb al-'Irāq ilā al-aqṭār al-'arabiyya', *Al-Bilad*, 17 February 1936, p. 4.
[110] Arnon Degani, 'They Were Prepared: The Palestinian Arab Scout Movement 1920–1948', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 41:2 (2014), pp. 200–218, here: p. 211; Peter Wien, *Iraqi Arab Nationalism*, pp. 88–93. However, some scout movements held a more complex attitude towards the Mandate powers, as shown by the example of the *Scout de France* in Aleppo; see Keith David Watenpaugh, *Being Modern in the Middle East*, pp. 191–298.
[111] Kirsten Scheid, 'Painters, Picture-Makers, and Lebanon: Ambiguous Identities in an Unsettled State' (Ph.D. thesis, Princeton University, 2005). See also Idir Ouahes, *Syria and Lebanon under the French Mandate*, p. 81. On the burgeoning Syrian scouting movement during the interwar years and its connections to political figures, see Philip S. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, pp. 397–433.

and Egypt in the 1920s and 1930s influenced each other and developed a 'shared consciousness'.[112]

Cross-border travel helped to bind these groups of young people together and, as such, was encouraged by pan-Arab political figures. For example, in the spring of 1933, a group of about 60 Iraqi scouts travelled to Transjordan, Palestine and Egypt before returning to Iraq via Syria. Throughout their journey, the Iraqi scouts were welcomed at each stage by political figures and by local scouting troops, as the U.S. ambassador in Baghdad noted upon their return.[113] On their arrival back in Beirut, they were invited to an official ceremony and to a party organised in their honour at AUB by Iraqi students.[114] Later in Damascus, the scouts were also welcomed at an official celebration. On that occasion, the founder of the Damascus daily, *Al-Qabas,* held up Iraqi independence as an example for Syrians and emphasised the need to strive towards bringing Syria and Iraq together. The Syrian member of parliament, Fakhri al-Barudi, also welcomed the visit of the Iraqi scouts to Damascus as a harbinger of the union of Iraq and Syria.[115] For students as well as scouts, travelling through and across the Syrian Desert was undertaken in a bid to create fellowship with their peers as well as to visit the Arab countries that surrounded the Syrian Desert.

Official tours: Occasions for sightseeing, learning and interacting

Similarly, various political figures travelled across the Syrian Desert on tours that combined official and tourism dimensions. In February 1936, the Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs wrote to the French Minister in Baghdad to inform him of the departure of a group of government officials who planned to cross Syria before continuing on to Palestine and Egypt where they were to attend an agricultural and industrial fair. This trip was an opportunity for them to visit these three countries.[116] The Iraqi government asked several travel agencies to make a bid and, although Thomas Cook & Son proposed reduced rates, it was eventually their competitor, Peltours, a tourism agency based in Palestine and Egypt, that won the bid for the trip.[117] The detailed trip itinerary shows the variety of activities planned during the three-week

[112] Samuel Dolbee, 'Mandatory Bodybuilding: Nationalism, Masculinity, Class, and Physical Activity in 1930s Syria' (MA thesis, Georgetown University, 28 April 2010), pp. 41–52.
[113] NARA, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Asia, 1910–1929, microfilm roll 18, File 890G.00, Press review with comments, attached to a letter from U.S. Consul Knabenshue to the Secretary of State, Baghdad, 22 April 1933.
[114] AUB, 'Al-kashshāfa al-'irāqiyya fī Bayrūt', *Al-Sha'b*, 12 April 1933, p. 3.
[115] AUB, 'Ḥaflat Dimashq al-kubrā li-takrīm kashshāfat al-'Irāq', *Al-Sha'b*, 14 April 1933, p. 1.
[116] CADC, 42CPCOM63, the French Minister to the French High Commissioner, Baghdad, 29 February 1936.
[117] TCA, Black Box No. 32, Road Transport, Histories, Nairn Trans-Desert Service: Thomas Cook & Son branch office in Baghdad to Thomas Cook & Son head office in London, 18 May 1936: 'In spite of the very cut rates, we

journey, commencing from the group's departure via the transdesert route on 3 March 1936 and ending with their return to Baghdad on 22 March 1936. The journey combined excursions to places reflecting social and economic development (the canning and copper factories in Damascus, a primary school in Jerusalem, the agricultural fair, a glass factory and spinning workshops in Cairo and a cement factory in Haifa) and sightseeing visits (the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, the pyramids and the tombs of the Caliphs in Cairo and the beach in Alexandria).[118]

Similar journeys were made in the opposite direction, notably by the Egyptian journalist and academic, 'Abd al-Wahhab 'Azzam (1893–1976), who travelled extensively throughout the post-Ottoman Middle East in the interwar period. From the 1920s, as a proponent of Arab nationalism, 'Azzam became an important figure, who sought to bring Egyptians and other Arab peoples together under the banner of Islam and Arabness.[119] Travelling was of crucial importance to 'Azzam, who wished thereby to meet his intellectual peers, to explore the countries of the former Ottoman Empire and go sightseeing as well as to build bridges between Egypt and the 'Islamic world'. In 1939, he published a book titled *Riḥlāt* in which he recounted the many trips he undertook in the early 1930s.[120] In December 1930, he travelled to Syria with a group of students and professors from the Egyptian University and with the aforementioned teacher and businessman, Iskandar Yared. The group travelled by car across the Sinai and Palestine to Damascus, where they toured the country and visited all the popular tourist sites of the time: the Roman temples of Baalbek, the souks of Homs, the waterwheels of Hama, the Citadel of Aleppo and many tombs and mosques along the way. 'Azzam was equally interested in visiting historical sites (from Islamic and pre-Islamic times) and places of contemporary economic and cultural relevance. In Damascus, he admired the syncretism between heritage and modernity that he observed in the architecture. Near the Umayyad Mosque, for example, he visited the Academy of Sciences (*Al-majma' al-'ilmī*), which was built inside an ancient construction dating back several centuries and was originally used as a tomb. 'It is now a

were unable to compete with Peltours, who, I understand, were prepared to lose as much as £150 on the booking, in order to secure the business […].'

[118] CADC, 42CPCOM63, Programme of the organised trip, attached to a letter from the French Minister, Baghdad, 29 February 1936.

[119] Amit Bein, *Kemalist Turkey and the Middle East: International Relations in the Interwar Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 212–213; Ralph Coury, '"Arabian Ethnicity" and Arab Nationalism: The Case of Abd al-Rahman Azzam', *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* Vol. 25 (1988), pp. 61–70; Adeed Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, p. 82.

[120] 'Abd al-Wahhab 'Azzam, *Riḥlāt* (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-risāla, 1939), pp. 20–27. The Egyptian writer Ahmad Amin, who was responsible for organising these trips, also wrote about them in his memoirs. Ahmad Amin, *Ḥayātī* (Cairo: Maktabat al-ādāb, 1952).

library', he enthused, adding, 'here, we must note again the greatness of our brothers, the people of Damascus, and their efforts to build the modern on the old'.[121]

The following year, 'Azzam set out on another journey with a group of students, this time leaving Cairo by train and travelling to Haifa, which they reached on 4 February 1931. They stopped in Haifa while the luggage was transferred to cars on which the words 'Shaaban & Co: Haifa, Beirut, Damascus, Baghdad, Tehran' were inscribed. He felt happy to deal with an Arab company, as he wrote in 1939, and found it impressive that such distances could now be covered at such a rapid pace that Damascus, Baghdad and Tehran became close legs of a journey lasting only a few days.[122] They left Haifa at 10:30 a.m. and headed for Damascus via Tiberias, crossing the Syrian border post of Banat Ya'cub and reaching Damascus at 8 p.m. They spent the next day visiting the city and meeting Damascene notables, such as Muhammad Kurd Ali. The next morning, the drivers picked them up at their hotel. 'But to go where?' wrote Azzam emphatically. 'To Baghdad! It is far away, but cars are like meteors, [and] they don't distinguish between far and near.'[123]

'Azzam described his first journey across the desert at length, mentioning the various police and border posts they passed through, but also noting that the border *per se* remained unnoticed. 'We were close to the border between Syria ('*al-Shām*') and Iraq—this is what the driver told us—and yet, we didn't see any sign of the border, just some tin cans and a small pile of earth. What Allah has brought into relation, humans don't divide it.'[124] Another episode of his journey is worth mentioning here. At the Syrian post of Abu Shamat, 'Azzam encountered two truck drivers and asked one of them, who was wrapped in a typical Iranian/Afghan fur coat, where he was arriving from. As the man told him he was coming from Tehran, they started talking in Farsi, but it turned out that the driver was actually a native of Baghdad. 'These modern means [of transportation]', wrote 'Azzam, 'will have an influence on people's language, morals and knowledge that one cannot estimate for the time being. The drivers will form a range of people of experience and travel that will create many bonds between many nations.'[125]

As can be seen from the above account, 'Abd al-Wahhab 'Azzam was convinced that the development of motorised transport and the expansion of transdesert travel would build bridges between the peoples surrounding the Syrian Desert and more broadly between the

[121] 'Abd al-Wahhab 'Azzam, *Riḥlāt*, p. 16.
[122] Ibid., p. 29. Original in Arabic: 'marāḥil mutaqāriba fī ṭarīq yaṭwīhi al-musāfir fī ayyām qalā'il'.
[123] Ibid., p. 31. Original in Arabic: 'al-sayyārāt ka-l-shuhub, lā tafruq bayna ba'īd wa qarīb.'
[124] Ibid., p. 35.
[125] Ibid., p. 34.

peoples of an 'Islamic world' that had ceased to exist symbolically since the abrogation of the Ottoman Caliphate in 1924, but which was likely to be revived through travels and exchange.[126] This is what he worked to foster by conducting trips with groups of students and peers. Upon their arrival in Baghdad, 'Azzam and his fellow travellers were received by numerous personalities. The warm welcome they received was for him a sign of the emergence of a shared consciousness among Arabs and Muslims in the post-Ottoman Middle East:

> They [the Iraqi people] demonstrated that the Iraqi nation (*al-'umma al-'irāqiyya*) does not live for itself alone, but lives for itself and for the Arab world as a whole. Every Eastern nation (*'umma sharqiyya*) is a part of a lively Eastern body (*'aḍū fī jism sharqī*) that has begun to feel the life [...].'[127]

In addition to meeting with various Iraqi personalities, 'Azzam took advantage of his stay in Iraq to explore the country, visiting different cities and historical and natural landmarks and learning about Iraq's recent developments. In Baghdad, the group visited the Royal Palace, the Iraqi Museum and different mosques in the neighbourhood of al-Adhamiyya. On the following day, they drove to Ctesiphon to see the famous remains of Taq Kasra. Another day, they travelled to Karbala, Najaf and Kufa, and made a detour to see the famous Lion of Babylon.[128] Subsequently, the group travelled to northern Iraq to see Samarra, Kirkuk and Mosul, visiting historic remains but also recent oil wells. On the train from Baghdad to Kirkuk, one of the travel companions remarked that the train journey had been much more pleasant than their previous journeys by car, which he had grown tired of. The hardships of the journey, 'Azzam and the others pointed out to him, were nevertheless necessary to acquire some knowledge of the geography.[129]

Travel was seen as having great unifying potential by proponents of pan-Arab rapprochement. In this regard, the development of transdesert traffic during the interwar period was widely used to organise semi-official group tours, in which government officials and Arab personalities visited Iraq, Syria, Palestine and Egypt with the aim of forging social, cultural and political ties between the new post-Ottoman states. As they travelled, these individuals sought to give shape to the dream of a vast pan-Arab regional space, which some hoped would be institutionalised through increased collaboration between Arab states, while others hoped that

[126] The abolition of the Ottoman Caliphate in 1924 gave rise to strong criticism of the Turkish Republic among Muslims, but also to an important debate on the meaning of the Caliphate and on whether or not its restoration was necessary. See, as a notable example, Mona Hassan, *Longing for the Lost Caliphate: A Transregional History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), pp. 142–183.
[127] 'Abd al-Wahhab 'Azzam, *Riḥlāt*, p. 88.
[128] Ibid., p. 71.
[129] Ibid., p. 74.

this space would develop into a unified entity. As discussed below, the potential role of these movements in strengthening regional interactions also attracted the attention of the French and British powers.

French and British apprehension

The intensification of transdesert connectivity, although encouraged by the two Mandate powers, inevitably raised questions among British and French officials and administrators, who feared that increased mobility would strengthen regional integration and Arab unification, thereby possibly undermining their authority in the Middle East. As the Egyptian historian, Younan Labib Rizq, has shown, the British paid particular attention to pan-Arab movements in the 1930s, producing numerous reports in Iraq, Palestine, Egypt and Britain on the various initiatives aimed at bringing the different Arab states and peoples together. International conferences (e.g. the World Islamic Congress of Jerusalem held in December 1931), periods of unrest and revolt (such as those in Syria and Palestine in 1936) and the travels of official figures all prompted the Foreign Office in London to gather the views of British administrators on the question of pan-Arabism.[130] One report, in particular, reveals that British administrators saw the development of transport and communications as a factor contributing to regional integration by helping to cultivate pan-Arab sentiments. Produced by the British-Sudan Agency in Cairo in 1936, the report began by highlighting various factors that had worked against the development of Arab nationalism, namely the end of Faysal's dream of an Arab state and the formation of separate states under French and British administrations. It then turned to other factors that had changed the situation:

> Better communications and the advent of the motor have brought the Arab States and peoples into close touch with each other. The morning papers of Cairo are read in Syria and Palestine in the course of the same day and in Mesopotamia a day or two later. The Arab youth, collected from all parts of Egypt, Syria, Mesopotamia, Hejaz and Yemen, now lives and study together in large numbers in schools and universities. In the American University of Beirut, the pivot of Near Eastern education, nearly a thousand Mahometan [*sic*] Arab young men, from all the above countries, associate and enjoy perfect freedom of self-expression. They dwell on past grievances of their race and are inspired with future ambitions; when they return to their homes in the

[130] Younan Labib Rizk, *Britain and Arab Unity: A Documentary History from the Treaty of Versailles to the End of World War II* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009) [Arabic 1999], chapters 3–4.

vacations, they relate to the older generations the precarious political status of Islam and of the Arabs, denouncing the infamy and treacherous policy of Great Britain and France.[131]

Notably, the various group travels, mentioned above, received special attention from French and British administrators in the 1930s. In June 1933, for example, the quarterly report of the British consulate in Damascus mentioned the passage of Iraqi scouts on their return from Egypt, pointing out that they had been 'entertained by the Nationalist Fakhri Baroudi' during a ceremony that provided a platform for 'political speeches on Arab unity'.[132] In March 1936, the trip of Iraqi officials to Syria, Palestine and Egypt organised by Peltours also featured in the quarterly reports of the British consulate in Damascus, which pointed out that a grand reception had been held at the Orient Palace Hotel in Damascus on their arrival. On this occasion, Fakhri Barudi made a speech with pan-Arab overtones, and Ibrahim Hilmi Omar, Controller of Press and Propaganda of the Iraqi government, appealed to Arab unity.[133] The French also pointed out that some members of the Iraqi delegation stayed in Syria for several extra days, during which time they wrote a letter of protest in support of their Syrian colleagues addressed to the League of Nations. In this letter, they asked that Syria's independence be granted along the lines of the Iraq model. [134]

Paul Lépissier, the French Minister in Baghdad, also reported on the Agricultural and Industrial Fair in Cairo, which he regarded as 'a pretext' for the trip of Iraqi officials to Egypt, saying that this was further evidence of the intensification of cultural exchanges between the two countries. Lépissier mentioned the visit of two pan-Arab personalities to Baghdad, namely the Lebanese journalist, As'ad Daghir, and the Egyptian journalist, Ibrahim 'Abd al-Qadir al-Mazini.[135] Attached to his letter was a detailed report on a meeting held at the Al-Muthanna Club in Baghdad, in which both men participated. Founded in 1935, Al-Muthanna Club was one of the most influential hubs for pan-Arabism in Iraq.[136] The report detailed al-Mazini's speech in which he provided evidence of Arab unity and stressed its importance, noting that it

[131] Michael G. Fry and Itamar Rabinovich (eds.), *Despatches from Damascus: Gilbert MacKereth and British Policy in the Levant, 1933-1939* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, University of Southern California, 1985), pp. 122–128.
[132] Jane Priestland (ed.), *Records of Syria* (London: Archives Edition, 2005), Volume 5, p. 228: Quarterly Reports for April 1st to June 30, 1933, British consul, Damascus, 1 July 1933.
[133] Ibid., Volume 5, p. 553: Quarterly Reports for January 1st to March 31, 1936, British consul, Damascus, 4 April 1936.
[134] CADC, 50CPCOM460, French Consul Paul Lépissier to the delegate general of the French High Commissioner, Baghdad, 22 April 1936.
[135] CADN, 1SL/1/V/1027, Paul Lépissier to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, French Minister, Baghdad, 25 February 1936.
[136] Adeed Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, pp. 78–79; Aline Schlaepfer, *Les intellectuels juifs de Bagdad*, p. 9.

was inevitable.[137] Similarly, in February 1936, the British Ambassador in Baghdad, Clark Kerr, wrote a report on 'Arab unity' in which he referred to al-Mazini's visit to Baghdad as a key element in the resurgence of Arab nationalism within the Iraqi population. While paying attention to foreign visitors to Iraq, he also kept an eye on Iraqis going on group trips abroad, mentioning, specifically, the departure of thirty students on a trip to Syria, Palestine and Egypt in February 1936.[138]

As Chapter 4 has shown, French and British administrators in Syria and Iraq were wary of the movements of certain intellectuals and political figures across the borders of the Mandate states, going so far as to deny visas to those considered to be political agitators. But they also kept an eye on students, scouts and political figures undertaking group tours, which they saw as potentially reinforcing pan-Arab sentiments and possibly anti-imperial animosity. In a report written in 1934, Gilbert MacKereth, the British consul in Damascus, wondered whether it was 'wise to seek to bring the Arab countries nearer to each other too quickly by hastening on inter-state communication'.[139] Discussing the Franco-British dispute that had arisen with the development of the Haifa–Baghdad route, he insisted on the need for the two powers to understand their common interests in the long term, especially in a context where, in his view, Arab governments were trying to play them off against each other. MacKereth regarded the intensification of connections and interactions between the post-Ottoman states as a potential threat to the French and British powers, whose imperial aims in the region were to form a 'collaborative project' rather than a competitive one.[140]

It appears, however, that while Mandate administrators remained alert to the influence of transdesert movements on the progress of Arab nationalism, they saw these movements less and less as a threat, at least on the British side.[141] In May 1936, the same Gilbert MacKereth expressed confidence that even though the pan-Arab movement was still vibrant in the Mandate

[137] CADN, 1SL/1/V/1027, 'Compte rendu du meeting au club El Mothana', Baghdad, 16 February 1936, attached to a letter written by Paul Lépissier.
[138] Quoted in Younan Labib Rizk, *Britain and Arab Unity*, pp. 122–123.
[139] TNA, FO 371/17829, British Consul Mackereth to George W. Rendel (Foreign Office), Damascus, 14 August 1934.
[140] This view was intimately linked to the emergence of a form of Franco-British 'co-imperialism', as argued by Thomas Martin et Toye Richard: 'To put this in concrete terms, for all their divisions, Britain and France increasingly faced much the same local, international, and transnational threats to their colonial hegemony. As a consequence, each feared the prospect of international isolation—before local opponents or in the court of international opinion—more than the inconvenient presence of their imperial neighbour.' See Thomas Martin et Toye Richard, *Arguing about Empire: Imperial Rhetoric in Britain and France, 1882-1956* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 10.
[141] Report by A. Clark Keer, British Ambassador, Baghdad, 28 May 1936, cited in Younan Labib Rizk, *Britain and Arab Unity*, p. 127.

states, 'slowly, yet surely, the national idea [was] developing'.[142] While transdesert travel served the pan-Arab cause during the interwar period by giving substance to a regional space straddling state borders, the territorial states were evidently gaining ground. In the final section of this chapter, I will turn to a discussion of the mobility of summer vacationers between Iraq and Syria, showing how their movements strengthened connections between the two countries, while also producing reactions of re-territorialisation.

Summer Tourists Crossing the Desert

As summer approached, traffic between Baghdad and Damascus increased substantially due to the outflow of large numbers of Iraqis who headed to Lebanese mountain resorts where they would spend the summer and of the many families of British officials going on holiday to Britain or to the French Mandate territories. Although summering in Mount Lebanon was already an established practice prior to the First World War, especially among wealthy families from Egypt and Ottoman Palestine, this practice became widespread during the interwar period. Moreover, the development of motorised transport across the Syrian Desert prompted Iraqi families to travel to Lebanon as well. This section traces the emergence of the Iraqi travelling practice of summering in the Lebanese and Syrian mountains, revealing how it sparked reactions in Iraq from state and non-state actors increasingly concerned with the promotion of a national economy. Their efforts to encourage the development of summering in northern Iraq show that increased social and economic interactions across the Syrian Desert could also lead to a reactionary drive to promote national (summer) tourism.[143]

Iraqis leaving to cool down in Lebanon

Long before the Mandate period, summer tourism in Mount Lebanon was practiced by members of the Arab bourgeoisie, who habitually spent their holidays in the mountains. This travelling practice marked a continuation of that of rural migrants in Beirut and other coastal cities, who would make seasonal trips to their home villages during the summer. Commencing from the 1880s, the European bourgeoisie began to spend time in the mountains of the Eastern Mediterranean as well. In the early twentieth century, summer holidays in Mount Lebanon,

[142] Jane Priestland (ed.), *Records of Syria* (London: Archives Edition, 2005), Volume 5, p. 732: Report on Pan-Arabism by British Consul Mackereth, Damascus, 15 May 1936.
[143] As revealed by historical scholarship, cross-border flows could generate reactions of regionalisation and re-territorialisation that curtailed these flows. See Matthias Middell and Katja Naumann, 'Global History and the Spatial Turn', p. 152; Matthias Middell, 'Transregional Studies: A New Approach to Global Processes', in Matthias Middell (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Transregional Studies* (London: Routledge, 2018), p. 2.

which were already popular among wealthy families in Ottoman Palestine, were also becoming popular among the Egyptian upper class after the construction of the railway line between Cairo and Haifa during the First World War.[144] As Andrea L. Stanton has shown in the case Palestinian summering in Lebanon, the Mandate period was marked by structural and logistical changes. Firstly, as agriculture and industry did not seem sufficient to ensure a sound economy in the post-war era, Lebanese economic elites encouraged the promotion of Lebanon as a 'seasonal travel destination' given its natural assets. Secondly, in response the formation of national borders, there were increased efforts to promote summer tourism in Lebanon and to develop transport infrastructure in order to mitigate the negative effects of territorial reshaping on mobility.[145]

The 1924 edition of a booklet published by the Society for Lebanese Summer Resorts (*Sharikat maṣāyif Lubnān*) mentioned the opening of the Baghdad–Damascus route, mainly with reference to the ability of Egyptian travellers to reach Baghdad in sixty-two hours. The Society encouraged Egyptians to spend the summer in Lebanon and Lebanese to visit the Nile Valley in winter as a 'social project' aimed at forging bonds between the 'two brotherly regions' of Lebanon and Egypt.[146] In the following years, however, the development of transdesert transport brought an increasing number of people from Iraq to the Lebanese mountains. The press bore witness to this development and to the burgeoning economic sector of tourism that was capitalising on summer visitors. In April 1924, *Lisan al-Hal* published an interview with the chairman of the Iraqi Trading and Agencies Co (*Al-Sharika al-'Irāqiyya li-l-Tijāra wa-l-Wikālāt*), who was visiting Lebanon to assess the possibilities of attracting Iranians and Iraqis to the Lebanese summer resorts. During the interview, the chairman pointed out that in the past, Iraqis used to travel to India for the summer holidays.[147] In the following years, the press reported on the growth of Iraqi summer visitors in the Lebanese and Syrian mountains, while stressing the need for infrastructure development and other incentives to encourage this expansion.[148]

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[144] Bruno Dewailly and Jean-Marc Ovazza, 'Le tourisme au Liban: Quand l'action ne fait plus système', in Mohamed Berriane (ed.), *Tourisme des nationaux, tourisme des étrangers: Quelles articulations en Mediterranée ?* (Florence: Institut Universitaire Européen de Florence, 2004), p. 2; Farid Amin Fuleihan, 'Lebanon as a Summer Resort' (MA thesis, AUB, 15 May 1929), p. 3; Andrea L. Stanton, 'Locating Palestine's Summer Residence', p. 48.

[145] Andrea L. Stanton, 'Locating Palestine's Summer Residence', pp. 46, 48–49.

[146] Sharikat Maṣāyif Lubnān, *Dalīl sharikat maṣāyif Lubnān 'an sanat 1924* (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-muqtaṭaf wa-l-muqaṭṭam, 1924), pp. 4, 54.

[147] AUB, 'Al-muwāṣalāt bayna Sūriyā wa-l-'Irāq: tanshīṭ al-Iṣṭiyyāf', *Lisan al-Hal*, 1 April 1924, p. 2.

[148] AUB, 'Al-'Irāq fī Lubnān', *Lisan al-Hal*, 1 August 1925, p. 2; 'Al-'Irāqiyyīn wa-l- iṣṭiyyāf', *Al-Sha'b*, 1 July 1927, p. 3; 'Tanshīṭ al-iṣṭiyāf fī sūriyā', *Al-Sha'b*, 15 July 1927, p. 1; 'Al-muṣṭāfūn yashkurūn ḍābiṭ lubnānī', *Al-*

French and British administrators also reported on the development of summering in Lebanon among Iraqis. In January 1925, the British consul in Beirut highlighted some developments but remained uncertain about the future.

> To get the visitors to their summer quarters and to enable them to derive some pleasure from their stay in the way of motoring trips, reasonably good roads are essential. Thanks to an advertising campaign, a very large number of visitors, estimated at between 10,000 and 15,000 came to Lebanon last summer. Most of them were from Egypt but Palestine, and even Iraq, contributed their quotas. It is to be feared that, owing to the short-sighted rapacity of the Lebanese, many of these visitors went away disappointed.[149]

Subsequent reports on transdesert traffic noted that the summer months were a time of heavy traffic between Baghdad and Damascus, which sometimes pushed the capacity of transport companies to their limits before decreasing again after the summer holidays.[150]

The number of Iraqi summer tourists travelling to Syria and Lebanon increased exponentially from a few dozen soon after the opening of the Baghdad–Damascus motor route to several hundred in the early 1930s, reaching a couple of thousand by the late 1930s. In August 1931, an article in *Le Commerce du Levant* noted that 5,784 summer tourists had visited Lebanon that year, including 4,250 Egyptians, 907 Palestinians and 627 Iraqis.[151] In August 1934, the French *chargé d'affaires* in Baghdad reported that 1,500 Iraqi holidaymakers had left Iraq for the French Mandate states during the summer.[152] Some years later, *Le Commerce du Levant* reported that according to the 'official figures', 5,008 Egyptians, 2,711 Palestinians and 2,361 Iraqis visited the summer resorts of Lebanon and Syria in 1937, and that out of a total of 18,604 foreign summer tourists in 1938, 8,264 Egyptians, 5,271 Palestinians and 4,062 Iraqis came to these destinations. As the newspaper pointed out, the figures almost doubled between 1937 and 1938, with a striking increase of almost 130% in 1938 compared with the average number of summer visitors over the previous eleven years.[153] It is evident from these figures that Iraqis constituted about 10% of the foreign summer tourists in Lebanon in 1931 and 20% in 1938. Their numbers could vary from year to year depending on the economic situation but also on specific events. For example, the cholera epidemic that broke out in southern Iraq in

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Bayraq, 4 October 1928, p. 3; '7 alāf muṣṭāf', *Al-Bayraq*, 15 August 1928, p. 1; 'Pour le développement du tourisme et de la villégiature au Liban', *Le Commerce du Levant*, 8 November 1929, p. 2.

[149] TNA, FO 424/632, British Consul Satow to Austen Chamberlain, Beirut, 9 January 1925.

[150] CADN, 1SL/1/V/702, Note by Dentz (*Service des Renseignements*), Beirut, 6 March 1925; TNA, CO 732/23/2, Extract from economic report No. 79, 29 March 1927.

[151] AUB, 'Le nombre de villégiateurs qui ont visité le Liban au cours de cet été', *Le Commerce du Levant*, 21 August 1931, p. 2.

[152] CADC, 50CPCOM459, Paul Lépissier to the French High Commissioner, Baghdad, 1 August 1934.

[153] AUB, 'La saison de villégiature 1938', *Le Commerce du Levant*, 21 October 1938, p. 1.

1931 prompted a greater number of Iraqis to travel to Lebanon. That year, several sources noted that the scale of transdesert traffic had declined, mainly due to a drop in the number of pilgrims using the Baghdad–Damascus route but that this decline had been offset by a greater movement of Iraqis westwards for the summer.[154] In 1932, particularly frequent dust storms around Baghdad prompted more people who could afford to do so to leave for the summer.[155]

Just as Iraq was marketed to European tourists as a place to visit, the Lebanese mountains were branded to Iraqis as a desirable summer destination. The promotion and advertising of Lebanese and Syrian summer resorts were carried out by the Lebanese government and French Mandate authorities, entrepreneurs, tourism agencies and transport companies as well as by the press. Newspapers frequently mentioned the visits of Iraqi personalities and officials to the summer resorts, thereby publicising the practice of Iraqi summering in Lebanon.[156] Furthermore, Mandate and local authorities in Lebanon and Syria endeavoured to attract Arab summer visitors to Lebanon. This was one of the aims of the *Commission du Tourisme et de la Villégiature* since its creation in 1923.[157] The governments also carried out advertising campaigns in Iraq, Palestine and Egypt.[158] As Farid A. Fuleihan noted in his undergraduate thesis in 1929, the French and Lebanese authorities engaged in extensive advertising campaigns abroad.[159] In Iraq, they made efforts to distribute guidebooks, publish advertisements in the press and organise outdoor displays in the following years, which were not always very successful.[160] In May 1933, for example, the entrepreneur, Joseph Khoury, was sent to Baghdad to organise the projection of illuminated posters depicting important sites in Lebanon. For several weeks, posters were projected on a screen in the main street of Baghdad, but the images chosen and their poor quality led the French *chargé d'affaires*

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[154] CADN, 1SL/1/V/703, Report on 'Transports transdésertiques', 1931; 'Transports transdésertiques', *Correspondance d'Orient: revue économique, politique & littéraire*, August 1932, p. 74 [Gallica.fr] (accessed on 6 June 2022).

[155] NARA, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Asia, 1910–1929, microfilm roll 18, File 890G.00, Report on Events for the Period 15 to 30 June 1932, written by Alexander K. Sloan, U.S. consul in Baghdad.

[156] AUB, 'Safar 'Abd al-Sa'dūn Muḥsin li-l-'Irāq', *Al-Bayraq*, 16 August 1929, p. 2; 'Al- iṣṭiyyāf', *Al-Bilad*, 6 July 1930, p. 4; 'qudūm', *Al-Bilad*, 28 September 1930, p. 4; 'safar', *Al-Ikha' al-watani*, 8 July 1932, p. 2; 'qudūm', *Al-Sha'b*, 23 August 1933, p. 2.

[157] Haut-Commissariat de la République française en Syrie et au Liban, *La Syrie et le Liban sous l'occupation et le mandat français, 1919-1927* (Nancy: Berger-Levrault, 1929), pp. 279–280.

[158] AUB, 'Al-di'āya li-l- iṣṭiyyāf', *Al-Bayraq*, 30 April 1929, p. 2.

[159] Farid Amin Fuleihan, 'Lebanon as a Summer Resort', p. 8.

[160] NARA, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Asia, 1910–1929, microfilm roll 17, File 890E.111, Note from the U.S. consulate, Beirut, 2 April 1932. However, the view expressed in the Lebanese newspaper, *Le Commerce du Levant,* in 1933 was that these efforts were not sufficient; what was needed was the establishment of a national office for tourism and summering. AUB, 'Pour une politique touristique: La création d'un office de tourisme et de villégiature', *Le Commerce du Levant*, 4 March 1933, p. 1.

in Iraq to conclude that the experiment was a complete failure.[161] The French consulate in Baghdad nevertheless continued its efforts to advertise Lebanese summer resorts to Iraqis. In 1934, Paul Lépissier noted that the statistics were encouraging.[162] The following year, the French authorities also lowered visa taxes for Egyptian, Iraqi, Transjordanian and Palestinian summer tourists in order to attract them to Lebanon and Syria.[163] The promotion of tourism and summering was also considered important by certain transport companies, such as Kawatly, Tawil & Co. In the mid-1920s, the Lebanese company collaborated with the French authorities by putting up advertising placards in Iraq, which promoted summering in Lebanon, as noted in a publication produced by the French High Commission.[164] Kawatly, Tawil & Co. also published a guide on summering and travel between Iraq and Lebanon in 1927.[165] An article published in May 1927 on the *Commission du Tourisme et de la Villégiature* in the newspaper, *Lisan al-Hal*, reported that Kawatly Tawil & Co. had applied for a grant to finance the printing and distribution of their guide on summering.[166]

What made Iraqis go to Lebanon in the summer? As reported in an issue of the Iraqi daily, *al-Bilad,* dated 5 September 1935, the newspaper's editor left Baghdad to spend a month in the Syrian mountains to relax, rest and entertain himself—a combination of motives conveyed by the expression *tarwīḥ al-nafas*.[167] A stay in a mountain summer resort was expected to provide a break from the routine of everyday life and a change of setting, literally a change of air. As Samuel Dolbee has shown, prior to the development of the 'germ theory', people considered air to be a key determinant of health. Before the mosquito was identified as a vector of several diseases, it was even widely thought that 'bad air' could cause malaria.[168] The appeal of summer resorts in Lebanon largely rested on the expectation that people could recover by changing their surroundings and enjoying the clean, healthy mountain air for a few

[161] CADC, 50CPCOM458, Paul Lépissier to the delegate general of the High Commissioner, Baghdad, 4 September 1933.
[162] CADC, 50CPCOM459, Paul Lépissier to High Commissioner De Martel, Baghdad, 4 August 1934.
[163] CADC, 50CPCOM544, the French Ministry for Foreign Affairs to diplomatic and consular officers in Egypt, Palestine, Transjordan and Iraq, Paris, 9 April 1935.
[164] Haut-Commissariat de la République française en Syrie et au Liban, *La Syrie et le Liban sous l'occupation et le mandat français, 1919-1927* (Nancy: Berger-Levrault, 1929), p. 280.
[165] This guide, published in 1927, is mentioned in Farid Amin Fuleihan, 'Lebanon as a Summer Resort', p. 55.
[166] Global Press Archive (GPA), 'Mashāri' lajnat al-siyyāḥa wa-l-iṣṭiyyāf', *Lisan al-hal*, 31 May 1927, p. 4. https://gpa.eastview.com/crl/mena (accessed 7 June 2022).
[167] AUB, 'safar', *Al-Bilad*, 5 September 1935, p. 5. The Hans Wehr dictionary mentions the expression *tarwīḥ 'an al-nafas* and translates *tarwīḥ* as 'ventilation; airing; refreshment; diversion; amusement'. See the Arabic Almanac https://ejtaal.net/aa/readme.html (accessed 7 June 2022).
[168] Samuel Dolbee, 'Borders, Disease and Territoriality in the Post-Ottoman Middle East', in Jordi Tejel and Ramazan Hakkı Öztan (eds.), *Regimes of Mobility: Borders and State Formation in the Middle East, 1918-1946* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), p. 206

weeks.[169] Tourist guides also helped to promote this idea. Iskandar Yared's *Guide for Summering and Tourism in Lebanon and Syria* (1934) included numerous articles written by doctors who praised the medical virtues of the Lebanese summer resorts.[170] A few years later, the commercial secretary of the British embassy in Iraq went to northern Iraq for a few days to get 'a change of air and scenery'. He then travelled to the mountains of Lebanon, feeling obliged to justify this trip undertaken outside of Iraq: 'I should add that on the Ambassador's advice I also spent some days in the Lebanon—a course also recommended by the Embassy doctor—, I was at the time suffering badly from boils and he strongly urged me to try a change of climate and food which it is not possible to obtain within Iraq.'[171]

Summer visitors were also looking for resorts that offered comfortable accommodation and all of the amenities necessary to have a relaxing and recreational stay. Comfort and good services were key elements to gain loyalty and new summer visitors, as conveyed by the following words printed in *Le Commerce du Levant*: 'One satisfied customer is worth a thousand ads.'[172] While summer resorts attracted visitors in need of health and recreation, they were also unique places of socialisation. In August 1932, a journalist from the Syrian newspaper, *Al-Qabas*, published a series of five articles on summering in Syria, focusing specifically on the mountain resort of Zabadani, in which he examined the frequentation, the conditions of transport to and from Damascus as well as the social and cultural dimensions of summering. According to this journalist, the cafés in the summer resorts were places of encounter and debate, where people held discussions that they would not dare to have elsewhere, including, for example, saucy talk.[173]

Although the statistics show that between 1,500 and 4,000 Iraqis visited the resorts in Lebanon and Syria each year, it must be noted that summering remained a travelling practice of the wealthy class. As an article in *Le Commerce du Levant* pointed out in June 1931, Lebanon's visitors were mainly composed of 'the wealthy bourgeoisie and of government officials from Egypt, Palestine and Iraq'. The article continued to argue that at a time when all

[169] Idir Ouahes, *Syria and Lebanon under the French Mandate*, p. 78; Andrea L. Stanton, 'Locating Palestine's Summer Residence', pp. 52–53.
[170] For example: 'Healthy Lebanon' (Lubnān al-ṣaḥḥī) by Dr. Sari al-Din, pediatrician at the AUB. See Iskandar Yared, *Dalīl al-iṣṭiyyāf wa-l-siyāha fī Sūriya wa Lubnān* (Beirut: Maṭba'a Rawḍat al-funūd, 1934), pp. 122–123.
[171] TNA, BT 60/53/1, Summerscale (commercial secretary to the British Embassy) to Holford Strevens, Baghdad, 27 July 1937 as well as to C.C. Farrer, 2 June 1937.
[172] AUB, 'Les résultats de l'estivage au Liban en 1937', *Le Commerce du Levant*, 2 November 1937, p. 1. Original in French: 'Un client satisfait équivaut à mille placards de publicité.'
[173] AUB, 'Maqāhā al-maṣāyif ka-ṣālāt al-rādiū' [radio], *Al-Qabas*, 18 August 1932, p. 1; 'Al-mughāzalāt al-gharāmiyya fī-l-maṣāyif, *Al-Qabas*, 21 August 1932, p. 1.

of the 'tourist countries' worldwide were facing a crisis resulting from a global depression[174], it was necessary to restrain taxes and abuses so that this clientele, well off but nonetheless with limited means, would continue to come.[175] Similarly, an article in *Al-Qabas,* published in August 1932, noted that while everyone would like to spend the summer in the mountain resorts, this came at a high cost, and in the current economic situation, people could not afford to go summering.[176] Another indication that summering remained expensive for Iraqis during the interwar period comes again from an article in *Le Commerce du Levant*, which noted that in 1937 that Iraqis and Egyptians constituted only a small proportion of short-stay summer tourists in Lebanon (i.e. less than two weeks). Due to the cost and time of travel, Iraqi and Egyptian families would only travel to 'spend the entire warm season or at least an extended holiday' in Lebanon.[177]

As mentioned above, many Iraqi political figures came each year to Lebanon as summer visitors. For them, and for other members of the Iraqi upper class, summering, as a family holiday, was often a recurring activity. In his memoirs, former Iraqi Finance Minister, Rauf al-Bahrani, recounted his multiple summer trips to Lebanon. The first was undertaken in 1927, when he left Iraq to spend the months of July, August and September with his family in the mountains of Syria and Lebanon. In 1933, as the summer approached, concerned about the health of his son, Ihsan, who had contracted whooping cough the previous year, he decided to return to Lebanon with his wife and two children. The trip to Lebanon was intended to help his son regain good health. Although he had been granted three months' leave, their stay was cut short by the announcement of the death of King Faysal in Switzerland. As he pointed out, most Iraqi officials who were summering in Lebanon decided to return to Iraq or travel to Haifa to receive the King's remains. In the summer of 1936, he once again travelled to Syria and Lebanon with his family, where they spent the entire season, visiting friends in Baalbek along the way.[178] Likewise, in July 1929, the new Iraqi Finance Minister, Yusuf Ghanima, travelled with his family to Lebanon, where his wife and children stayed at a summer resort, while he continued his journey to Paris in the hopes of finding an effective treatment for his heart condition. He recounted his experience of this three-month journey in a travelogue published

[174] The economic crisis strongly affected the summering tourist sector in Lebanon during the first half of the 1930s. Josette Kfoury, 'Liban, pays de tourisme', *Revue de géographie de Lyon* 34:3 (1959), p. 276. See also AUB, 'Le Liban de demain: Centre idéal de Villégiature du Proche-Orient', *Le Commerce du Levant*, 12 August 1938, p. 1.
[175] AUB, 'Tourisme, villégiature', *Le Commerce du Levant*, 12 June 1931, p. 1.
[176] AUB, 'Rībūrtājunā [our reportage] 'an al-maṣāyif (2)', *Al-Qabas*, 11 August 1932, p. 1.
[177] AUB, 'Les résultats de l'estivage au Liban en 1937', *Le Commerce du Levant*, 2 November 1936, p. 1.
[178] Rauf al-Bahrani, *Mudhakkirat Ra'ūf al-Baḥrānī* (Beirut: Al-mu'assasa al-'arabiyya li-l-dirāsāt wa-l-nashr, 2009), pp. 187, 202–204, 218.

under the title *Riḥla ilā Urubbā* 1929 ('A Journey to Europe 1929').[179] The first part of the travelogue highlights the importance of summering in Mount Lebanon for wealthy Iraqi families, while showing that the journey could also be combined with visits to museums, archaeological sites, cultural institutions and iconic places, such as the site of the Battle of Maysalun. In short, Ghanima's trip shows that summering and sightseeing could go very well together.[180]

Keeping Iraqis in Iraq: The difficult development of domestic summering

The movement of Iraqi summer visitors to Lebanon helped to shape economic and social interactions that transcended state borders. Part of the Iraqi wealthy class had become accustomed to spending the summers in Lebanon, returning regularly to the same resorts. However, these growing connections sparked a nationalist response from some Iraqi state officials and intellectuals, who endeavoured to encourage the development of summer resorts in northern Iraq in the 1930s. Initially promoted by King Faysal, this project was aimed at developing the tourism potential of Iraq and cultivating an inclination among Iraqis to explore summering in their own country so as to avoid travelling and spending their money abroad. In other words, despite the strong support of King Faysal and the Iraqi government for pan-Arab policies,[181] the outflow of Iraqi capital to Lebanon pushed the government (and some intellectuals) to support policies aimed at strengthening the domestic economy and bringing the mountains of northern Iraq into the national imaginary. Nevertheless, as will be shown, the coming to fruition of these projects proved very challenging.

Towards the end of July 1932, about two months before the admission of Iraq as an independent member state of the League of Nations, King Faysal travelled to northern Iraq with a few ministers to explore the possibility of developing summer tourism in this mountainous area. The delegation hoped to identify the best site to establish the first summer resort.[182] A decade later, Muhammad Amin Zaki, a Kurdish member of parliament, recounted this journey

[179] Yusuf Ghanima, *Riḥla ilā Ūrubbā 1929: Mukhtārāt min yawmiyyāt wa rasāʾil* (Baghdad: Maṭbaʿat al-Sa'dūn, 1986).
[180] For a more detailed analysis of his trip to Europe and his account of it, see César Jaquier, 'Beyond Sea and Desert: Journeying Between London and Baghdad in the Interwar Years', in Anna Bundt and Leon Julius Biela (eds.), *Interwar Crossroads: Entangled Histories of the Middle Eastern and North Atlantic World between the World Wars* (Bielefeld: transcript, forthcoming in 2022).
[181] Nur Masalha states that Faysal's pan-Arab policies were largely motivated by economic reasons, including developing transregional trade. See Nur Masalha, 'Faisal's Pan-Arabism, 1921–33', *Middle Eastern Studies* 27:4 (1991), p. 680.
[182] NARA, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Asia, 1910–1929, microfilm roll 18, File 890G.00, Report on Current Events for the Period 15 to 31 July 1932, transmitted by U.S. Consul Sloan to the Secretary of State, Baghdad, 1 August 1932.

in an article published in the Baghdad newspaper, *Al-Bilad*, in a somewhat romanticised way. One day in August 1932, in the vicinity of Shaqlawa, King Faysal began to take notes amidst the beautiful scenery before calling his ministers and advisors to share with them the text he had written about the surrounding landscapes. At this time, he had decided to make this place a holiday resort where Iraqis could spend the summer rather than going abroad.[183] The first steps were taken during the following years, starting with the establishment in 1933 of various commissions to study the potential of developing summering in the northern districts of Iraq.[184] A government delegation made the trip in 1934 to select a suitable site for a first summer resort, and the Parliament passed a budget in the same year to launch the construction of roads and hotels as well as to begin advertising the resorts. The advertising campaign included the production of a film about the landscapes of northern Iraq.[185]

As noted in an article in *Al-Bilad* published in 1935, the aim was to 'make Iraqis prefer the summer resorts of their country to others'. The writer of the article added, however, that this goal had not yet been achieved.[186] A month later, the newspaper expressed satisfaction that the Iraqi government was taking the issue seriously:

> We have learned that the Ministry of Economy and Communications, as the summer season approaches, has begun to pay considerable attention to the issue of organising Iraqi summer resorts in order to ensure the comfort of summer visitors and to look after the interest of the nationals [*abnā' al-waṭan*], many of whom travel each season to Lebanon or Europe for summering and spend huge amounts of money there.[187]

In April 1935, the commission established for the study and development of summering examined the reports of different local commissions and found that Araden would be the most suitable site to select as the main destination for Iraqi summering not only because of its landscape, its altitude and its central location but also because the road linking Araden to Mosul was already paved.[188] That year, about 80 families from Mosul and Baghdad spent the summer in the summering sites of Sawlaf and Araden. In addition, Rawanduz was also becoming an attractive site for summering.[189]

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[183] AUB, Muhammad Amin Zaki, 'Al-maṣāyif al-'irāqiyya', *Al-Bilad*, 20 November 1944, p. 1
[184] AUB, 'La villégiature en Irak', *Le Commerce du Levant*, 2 August 1933, p. 1.
[185] Author unknown, *Dalīl al-mamlaka al-'irāqiyya li-sana 1935–1936 al-māliyya* (Baghdad: Dangoor, 1935), pp. 538–540.
[186] AUB, 'Al-maṣāyif al-'irāqiyya wa maw'id tanẓīmihā', *Al-Bilad*, 26 February 1935, p. 4.
[187] AUB, 'Al-maṣāyif al-'irāqiyya wa wujūb al-'ināya bihā', *Al-Bilad*, 28 March 1935, p. 4.
[188] The National Library of Israel (NLI), *Al-Iqtisadat al-'Arabiyya*, 15 April 1935, p. 28; AUB, 'al-maṣāyif al-'irāqiyya wa taqrīr al-lajna 'anhā ilā wizāra al-dākhiliyya', *Al-Bilad*, 3 April 1935, p. 5.
[189] AUB, 'Al-maṣāyif al-'irāqiyya fī hādhā-l-'ām', *Al-Bilad*, 24 November 1935, p. 3; Mrs Lindfield Soane, 'A Recent Journey in Kurdistan', *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society* 22:3 (1935), p. 412.

Diverting Iraqis from summer resorts abroad remained the main motivation behind the development of summering in northern Iraq. At a meeting of the Council of Ministers held in January 1936, the parliamentarian for Mosul, Sa'id al-Hajj Thabit, reminded his colleagues of this imperative.[190] Similarly, the official *Guide to the Iraqi Kingdom for the Financial Year 1935*–1936 explained that the project to develop Iraqi summer resorts was prompted by the movement of large numbers of Iraqis to foreign summer resorts each year, which caused great economic harm to Iraq.[191] In the mid-1930s, the Iraqi government continued to advertise and promote summering in Iraq. In May 1936, the French Legation in Baghdad reported that the Iraqi government had decided to grant allowances to those officials who chose to spend the summer in the summer resorts of Iraq, while giving nothing to those who opted to go abroad for the summer. The following month, the Legation reported that propaganda in favour of Iraqi summering was carried out in Baghdad by people driven by 'national motives'.[192]

Apart from government-led initiatives, private actors also began to market the mountain region of northern Iraq in the 1930s. One of these individuals was Yunan 'Abu Yunan, an Iraqi intellectual from Mosul who worked as the editor of the newspaper, *Mosul*, before moving to Baghdad. In 1934, he published a *Guide to Iraqi Summer Resorts* (*Dalīl al-Masāyif al-'Irāqiyya*).[193] In an article published in *Al-Bilad* in June 1937, he retraced the process of the development of summering in Iraq. According to him, Iraq's natural resources—the landscape, climate and abundant water of the northern mountain regions—were not sufficient on their own to satisfy people. A 'human society' was also needed to undertake the construction of summer resorts, roads, hotels, markets and health clinics—all 'secondary' elements required by 'modern' people (*al-nafs al-'aṣriyya* and *al-ajsām al-ḥadītha*). In his view, the best summering site in Iraq was the range of the Sinjar Mountains 'because its climate [was] temperate and healthy, devoid of the malaria that was prevalent in the northeastern mountains'.[194] At the time when 'Abu Yunan wrote this article, the Iraqi government had somewhat scaled back its efforts to develop Iraqi summering. The difficulty in selecting an ideal location and the recurrent problem of malaria had slowed down the project. But above all, it was the military coup led by

[190] AUB, Iraq's Official Gazette (Al-Waqāi' al-'irāqiyya: al-jarīda al-rasmiyya li-jumhūriyyat al-'Irāq), 19th Sitting of the Council of Deputies, 12 January 1936, p. 255.
[191] Author unknown, *Dalīl al-mamlaka al-'irāqiyya li-sana 1935–1936 al-māliyya* (Baghdad: Dangoor, 1935), pp. 538–539.
[192] CADN, 1SL/1/V/1026, 'Nouvelles diverses', the French Legation in Iraq to the general delegate of the French High Commissioner, 19 May 1936 and 23 June 1936.
[193] Author unknown, *Dalīl al-mamlaka al-'irāqiyya li-sana 1935–1936 al-māliyya*, p. 539. For a short biographical note on Yunan 'Abu Yunan, see Kamil Salman al-Jaburi, *Mu'jam al-udabā' min al-'aṣr al-jāhilī ḥattā sanat 2002* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'ilmiyya, 2003), p. 75.
[194] AUB, Yunan 'Abu Yunan, 'Masāyif al-'Irāq fī-l-shamāl: Jabal Sinjār al-ṣaḥḥī', *Al-Bila*d, 8 June 1937, pp. 1, 8.

Bakr Sidqi and members of the al-Ahali Group in October 1936 that put a temporary end to the developmentalist policy that had been pursued since 1932.[195] Curiously, the government established after the coup chose not continue to develop Iraqi summer resorts, perhaps because it lacked the time and capacity to do so, even though it displayed a strong Iraqi nationalist stance symbolised by the slogan 'Iraq first'.[196]

Two years later, Iraqis were still travelling to Lebanon in large numbers during the summer, as shown by the above-mentioned statistics. In 1938, the American legation in Baghdad reported that the local press complained about the loss to the Iraqi economy caused by this movement, citing in particular an extract from the newspaper *Al-Akhbar*[197] dated 2 September 1938, which read:

> Summer resorters [*sic*] have acquired the habit of buying their requirements in clothing and furnishings for one year, for themselves and relatives, before their return to Iraq. This action has had its effect on the local market and retailers are complaining of poor sales due partly to this.[198]

This assertion is confirmed by an article in *Le Commerce du Levant*, which detailed the expenditure of the summer tourists in Lebanon, concluding that while the summer visitors had collectively spent about 80 million francs in running expenses in 1937 (accommodation, food, etc.), the various purchases they made before returning home reached 20 million francs: 'Most of them—not to say all of them—attracted by the low prices charged by our traders, stocked up on all sorts of items before leaving our country, including toiletries, clothes, shoes etc [...].'[199]

The question of Iraqi summering was taken up again by the Iraqi government with renewed determination in 1939–1940. The aim was not only to provide easier access to the summering stations and better accommodation but also to ensure the provision of all of the facilities and amenities that the Iraqis had become accustomed to in Lebanon since the mid-

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[195] Captain Gowan, 'Northern Iraq', *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society* 25:2 (1938), p. 194; AUB, Muḥammad Amin Zaki, 'Al-maṣāyif al-'irākiyya', *Al-Bilad*, 20 November 1944, p. 1.

[196] On the military coup of Bakr Sidqi and the policy of the government of Prime Minister Hikmat Sulayman (in office from October 1936 to August 1937), see Adeed Dawisha, *Iraq: A Political History from Independence to Occupation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), pp. 92–104; Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 86–91 (3rd edition).

[197] Rafa'il Butti, the editor of *Al-Akhbar*, was also the editor of *Al-Bilad*.

[198] NARA, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Asia, 1910–1929, microfilm roll 18, File 890G.00, 'Summaries or Copies of Certain News Appearing in the Local Press', U.S. Legation, Baghdad, 19 September 1938.

[199] AUB, 'Qu'a rapporté au Liban la dernière saison touristique?', *Le Commerce du Levant*, 31 October 1938, p. 1. In French: 'la plupart d'entre eux—pour ne pas dire leur unanimité—alléchés par les prix réduits modestes pratiqués par nos commerçants, se sont approvisionnés avant de quitter notre pays en toutes sortes d'objets, notamment en articles de toilettes, vêtements, chaussures etc. […].'

1920s.[200] Nonetheless, in 1939, only a small number of Iraqis spent the summer in the north of the country. That year, the royal family did not set an example, as they travelled instead to a summer resort in Lebanon. The decision regarding their travel to Lebanon was not taken easily, as the government would have preferred the King to spend the summer in Iraq rather than encourage summering in Lebanon. However, as no suitable place could be found for the royal family in the mountains of Iraq, they left Baghdad in a convoy of the Nairn Transport Company on 11 July bound for Aley in Lebanon.[201]

The Second World War gave a new twist to the situation. However, unlike the movements of hajj pilgrims, which were rerouted from Lebanon and Syria to Iraq in December 1940, those of Iraqi summer visitors were interrupted. In May 1940, the Iraqi government decided to ban Iraqis from travelling to Lebanon for the summer.[202] This move inevitably led to an increase in the number of Iraqis who summered in northern Iraq that year. In June, *Al-Bilad* noted that many families were travelling north from all over the country. Accommodation in the various summer resorts was said to be saturated from July onwards. Reportedly, the *Mutasarrif* of Mosul set up tents in parks and gardens to accommodate the new arrivals, and forbade landlords to raise the rent of their houses exorbitantly.[203] In early August, *Al-Bilad* reported news from the Mosul newspaper *Al-Balagh* that several thousand Iraqis were summering in the district. 'The number of summer visitors is estimated at 3,000 people. The hotels, cafes, restaurants and gardens are filled with people from Basra, Hilla, Najaf, Mosul, Baghdad, Kirkuk, Erbil and other liwas'.[204] Ultimately, the war-induced suspension of transdesert traffic enabled the fulfilment of the plans of Iraqi intellectuals and officials to encourage summering in Iraq.[205] Wartime events temporarily disrupted the transdesert connections produced through the mobility of summer visitors. However, the Second World War did not simply mark a period of disconnection for the Syrian-Iraqi space; above all, it prompted the reorganisation of flows and controls on a regional scale. The management of

[200] AUB, 'Mashrū' tanẓīm al-maṣāyif al-'irāqiyya', *Al-Bilad*, 2 January 1940, p. 2; 'Takhṭīṭ ṭuruq al-maṣārif al-'irāqiyya', *Al-Bilad*, 22 April 1940, p. 2; 'Al-maṣāyif al-'irāqiyya: maṣiaf Ṣalaḥ al-Dīn', *Al-Bilad*, 2 September 1940, pp. 1, 4.

[201] NARA, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Asia, 1910–1929, microfilm roll 18, File 890G.00, 'Current Events for the Period July 1–15, 1939, attached to a letter from U.S. Consul Knabenshue to the Secretary of State, Baghdad, 26 July 1939.

[202] NARA, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Asia, 1910–1929, microfilm roll 18, File 890G.00, General Conditions/176, Extract from *The Iraq Times* of 6 June 1940, attached to a letter from U.S. Consul Knabenshue to the Secretary of State, Baghdad, 17 July 1940.

[203] AUB, 'Nishāṭ ḥarakat al-iṣṭiyāf fī maṣāyif al-shamāl', *Al-Bilad*, 24 June 1940, p. 2; 'Fī maṣāyif al-waṭan', *Al-Bilad*, 18 July 1940, p. 2

[204] AUB, 'Al-iqbāl 'alā maṣāyif al-shamāl', *Al-Bilad*, 6 August 1940, p. 2.

[205] On the sharp decline in transdesert traffic in 1940, see TNA, FO 624/21/501, Minute Sheet on 'Nairn', 11 July 1940.

commodity flows by the Middle East Supply Centre (MESC) reflects this process.[206] As far as summering was concerned, the war nevertheless enabled the Iraqi state to pursue a more exclusivist economic agenda in response to the outflow of capital to Lebanon and Syria. During the 1920s and 1930s, the growing integration of the Syrian–Iraqi space resulting from transdesert mobility sparked its territorialising reactions as well.

Conclusion

In the interwar period, the Syrian Desert developed into a space of intense movement and a junction between regions that were once poorly integrated. Although the caravan trade had fostered important commercial connections between Bilad al-Sham and the Mesopotamian–Khalijian region prior to the twentieth century, transdesert connectivity remained tenuous and mobility was confined to certain groups of people. Between the 1920s and 1930s, the intensification and diversification of local people's movements across the desert, whether collective or individual, greatly enhanced transdesert interactions and shaped multiple geographies straddling the Syrian Desert and the Syrian–Iraqi border. Thus, political territories coexisted with different spaces imagined and lived by local people as they moved around.

By examining the mobilities of Arab journalists, students, scouts, officials and summer visitors, this chapter has shown that transdesert mobility was both a reaction to and a driver of the spatial and territorial reconfigurations of the post-Ottoman period. In response to the process of state territorialisation, numerous intellectuals with pan-Arab leanings promoted, organised and participated in group trips between Iraq and Syria, but more widely between the Arab states bordering the Syrian Dessert and beyond as far as Egypt. Students, scouts and political figures took advantage of the ease of travel across the Syrian Desert, undertaking journeys to explore places once considered far-flung to connect with their peers and forge regional affinities. For many journalists, too, travelling was a way of grasping the changing post-Ottoman space, either by touring their own national territory or by exploring beyond state borders to gain a sense of the differences and similarities between themselves and the Other. Thus, transdesert mobility was in part a manifestation of people seeking to adapt to, or withstand, the splitting of the post-Ottoman space into national bounded spaces.

[206] Simon Davis, 'Guided Development versus New Deal Internationalism', in Ashley Jackson, Yasmin Khan and Gajendra Singh (eds.), *An Imperial World at War: Aspects of the British Empire's War Experience, 1939–1945* (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 84–102; Ashley Jackson, *British Empire and the Second World War* (London: Hambledon Continuun, 2006), pp. 145–170.

Conversely, increased movements across the Syrian Desert in the 1920s helped to expand people's spatial imaginations and contributed to the crafting of a Syrian–Iraqi or regional space. By travelling, people discovered for themselves the cities and environments located on the other side of the desert, often realising that their knowledge of these places was limited or wrong. The many travel accounts of journalists and intellectuals published in book form or as serials in newspapers also helped to make these distant places familiar to their readers. In short, travelling and travel writing were two activities that helped to shape representations of national and regional space among educated Arabs. The rise of leisure travel and sightseeing also familiarised the inhabitants of the post-Ottoman states with the Syrian Desert region. This chapter has offered new insights into an underexplored subject, namely the growth of regional tourism as it was practiced and widely promoted by nationals of the post-Ottoman states in the interwar period. The development of transdesert transport served as a catalyst for the emergence of new forms of mobility oriented towards leisure and consumption, and entailing sightseeing, which were motivated by curiosity and the desire to get away from everyday life. The development of regional tourism also induced a different experience of space. Travellers did not just go directly from one town to another; instead, they stopped along the way, made excursions and toured the countries surrounding the Syrian Desert. Thus, such tourism practices contributed to shaping a regional space in the minds of the inhabitants of the post-Ottoman Middle East.

Finally, by examining the practice of Iraqi summering in Lebanon, this chapter has highlighted the growth of another form of transdesert mobility, which by forging economic and social links across countries on both sides of the desert, frustrated a certain section of the Iraqi political elite which, although leaning towards pan-Arabism, resented the idea of wealthy families spending their money abroad. Up to a few thousand Iraqis crossed the desert every year in search of summer resorts where they could find a temperate and relaxing setting, comfortable accommodation and a unique social environment but also where they spent large sums of money on daily expenses and purchases of all kinds. The project to develop summer resorts in northern Iraq as a reaction to this outflow demonstrates that the integration of the Syrian–Iraqi space not only proceeded hand in hand with the formation of state territories and the territorialisation of economies but it also reinforced this process.

This case study also reveals the limits of the pan-Arab utopia of unifying Arab states. Nevertheless, even as territorial states gained ground during the 1930s, they also became increasingly integrated. The Iraqi government's difficulties in diverting Iraqis from Lebanese summer resorts clearly reveals that by the end of the 1930s, these resorts had gained their favour

over more than a decade. Wealthy Iraqis had become accustomed to travelling to Lebanon, where they found better facilities and comfortable and sanitary conditions, thereby sustaining travel practices that gave shape to a regional space.

Conclusion

> Roads and railways are not just technical objects then but also operate on the level of fantasy and desire. They encode the dreams of individuals and societies and are the vehicles whereby those fantasies are transmitted and made emotionally real.[1]

In March 1945, the founding of the Arab League brought together Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Transjordan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Egypt within a regional organisation aimed at strengthening their cohesion.[2] As provided for in Articles 2 and 4 of the Pact of the Arab League, several commissions were subsequently established to coordinate the policies of the various states in matters of economy, culture, social and administrative affairs and transport.[3] Commencing from 1956, the Communications and Transport Commission was chaired by the Lebanese engineer, Anis Chebat,[4] who in 1962, published a study on the international road network of the Middle East, which, he proposed, should form the backbone of the Arab states' transport system. The study identified the main highways that member states of the Arab League should build, improve and widen in order to develop a 'Pan-Arab network' aimed at improving communications and relations between the Arab states and their populations.[5] In Chebat's view, the Basra–Baghdad–Damascus–Beirut highway held an important place in this network, as it not only linked Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon but it also connected the Arab countries to Europe and Asia. He suggested that the different member states of the Arab League should collectively finance a transport company to operate on this regional

[1] Brian Larkin, 'The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42:1 (2013), p. 333.
[2] Cyrus Schayegh, *The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World*, pp. 13, 275; Michael Thornhill, 'Britain and the Politics of the Arab League', in Michael Cohen and Martin Kolinsky (ed.), *Demise of the British Empire in the Middle East: Britain's Responses to Nationalist Movements, 1943–55* (London: Frank Cass, 1998), pp. 41–63.
[3] 'Pact of the League of Arab States, Cairo, 22 March 1945', *International Law Studies* 45:1 (January 1948), p. 206–207. https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/ils/vol45/iss1/16/ (accessed 20 June 2022).
[4] Born in Damascus to a Greek Orthodox family in 1908, Anis Chebat was hired in 1929 by the Public Works Department in Damascus, subsequently rising steadily up the ranks until he became the Director of Communications in the Ministry of Public Works and Communications in 1929, after the French Mandate ended. See Jane Priestland (ed.), *Records of Syria* (London: Archives Edition, 2005), Volume 11, Appendix 'Biographical Notes', p. 8.
[5] Anis Chebat, *Réseau routier international au Moyen-Orient* (S.l., Fédération Routière Internationale, 1962).

network of highways. He believed that this company could take over the buses of the former Nairn Transport Company, which had ceased to operate in the late 1950s.[6]

The study by the Communications and Transport Commission of the Arab League highlights the regional and global importance that the Baghdad–Damascus route had acquired by the late 1950s. But it also shows that this route continued to generate projections and crystallise the 'dreams' of individuals and societies, to borrow the words of Brian Larkin in the epigraph of this chapter. Since its inauguration in 1923, the Baghdad–Damascus route had fuelled aspirations and expectations and spawned many projects initiated by local, national and imperial actors. From the outset, the burgeoning transdesert traffic held out the promise of intensified and accelerated mobility across and beyond the Syrian Desert. The Baghdad–Damascus route thus raised hopes among foreign and local transport entrepreneurs, merchants and tourism promoters of the accrual of benefits. Furthermore, in the context of territorial state making in the French and British mandated territories, the development of this route created fertile ground for various projects. It nurtured aspirations for imperial expansion, regional unification and national development. These visions, ambitions and plans anticipated a profound reorganisation of transdesert mobility and, more broadly, a major shift in the connectivity of the states surrounding the Syrian Desert. This dissertation has investigated these transformations of transdesert mobility and connectivity, exploring the implications of such projections but also the actual development of the Baghdad–Damascus route during the interwar years and its consequences for the spaces and territories that encircled the Syrian Desert.

While the Baghdad–Damascus route was the object of such projections, its creation was also a specific achievement that did not fully meet the expectations and objectives of its proponents. The formation of the new transport system across the Syrian Desert, the organisation and regulation of traffic as well as developments in the transport sector (Chapters 1–3) resulted from the combined influence of multiple forces and agents, both human and non-human. Transport entrepreneurs, local merchants and highway robbers, U.S. car manufacturers, consular officers and state administrators as well as various environmental circumstances shaped both the immense potential and the limitations of the Baghdad–Damascus route. Furthermore, the many people who advertised, promoted and arranged travel across the Syrian Desert and, most importantly, those who travelled themselves (Chapters 4–6) transformed the Baghdad–Damascus route into more than just an infrastructural system. Their efforts and

[6] Ibid. On the termination of the Nairn Transport Company, see John Munro, *The Nairn Way: Desert Bus to Baghdad* (New York: Caravan Books, 1980), pp. 108–109.

movements transformed it into a central route between Syria and Iraq as well as a hub of regional and transregional mobility networks. The development of the Baghdad–Damascus route therefore belies any statist, imperialist and technology-centred narrative focusing on a linear process of expansion driven by a singular, overriding force.

Certainly, the post-Ottoman states played a major role in shaping the new transport system across the Syrian Desert that was commensurate with their interests and concerns regarding transdesert mobility. Far from minimising the roles of those in power, this dissertation has shown that the Mandate authorities, and to a lesser extent local governments, influenced the development of the Baghdad–Damascus route in multiple ways. Moreover, the French and British did not hesitate to favour their national-imperial interests whenever possible. The chapters of this dissertation have also shown how states wielded their authority in coercive ways that were often discriminatory towards nomadic groups, insurgents, entrepreneurs, travellers and migrants. Nonetheless, state actions were by no means autonomous, homogenous or even always successful. Instead, they were the result of internal debates and reflected dissension within and between the many levels of governance in the Mandate states. They often entailed the reworking of states' ambitions and plans in response to an inadequate understanding of environmental, security and socio-economic contexts. At times, they were also ineffective, as illustrated by their failure to secure transdesert traffic, control the desert borderlands and regulate cross-border mobility effectively. By focusing on the Baghdad–Damascus route, this dissertation has advanced understanding of the workings of the Mandate states in Syria and Iraq. Without downplaying the impact of power relations in the formation of this route, or the consequences of imperialist practices, norms and discourses on local societies, it has highlighted the heterogeneity of positions and discourses among representatives of the Mandate states as well as their limited capacities and their failures.

The development of the Baghdad–Damascus route during the interwar years profoundly reshaped transdesert mobility. The desert terrain conditions, combined with the initiatives of resourceful caravan traders as well as foreign and local transport entrepreneurs were conducive to the rapid development of motorised transport across the desert. The regular services established by transport companies and self-employed drivers made it possible to cross the desert in two or three days in the mid-1920s (about twenty to twenty-four hours of driving, not counting breaks) and in one to two days in the late 1930s (fifteen to seventeen hours' travel time without breaks on Nairn buses). By contrast, caravans took weeks to cross the desert in the early twentieth century. Over time, increased competition, savings on operating costs as

well as the provision of less luxurious services resulted in a sharp reduction in minimum fares for transdesert travel.

Against this background, the interwar years witnessed an acceleration, intensification and diversification of transdesert mobility. In addition to the postal traffic of the early days, traffic associated with the goods trade also developed, albeit at a slower pace, and above all, passenger transport increased tremendously. In the 1930s, the number of people crossing the desert on the Baghdad–Damascus route varied annually between 15,000 and 20,000. These travellers were journalists, professors and government officials; merchants, entrepreneurs and smugglers; students, scouts and performers; pilgrims, tourists and migrants as well as many others who travelled by choice or necessity. Their nationalities were also diverse, including Lebanese, Syrians and Iraqis; French and British; but also a great number of people from neighbouring countries and from much further afield.

That said, it is important to point out that this heightened mobility did not imply uniformly developed transport networks, unhindered and risk-free mobility, freedom of movement for all or easily-negotiable, drivable surfaces between the arrival and departure points of the transport system. As this dissertation has shown, the desert terrain, heat, sandstorms, rains and floods put intense pressure on vehicles, drivers and passengers and, most importantly, undermined the stability of the transport system. Human activities also caused disruptions and interruptions to the transport system. Until well into the interwar period, highway robbers raided cars and vans travelling between Damascus and Baghdad on repeated occasions. The attacks on cars by bandits, rebels and members of nomadic groups were reactions to socio-economic and political transformations in the regions bordering the Syrian Desert. Accordingly, the transdesert corridor became a space of contestation and of confrontation between states and non-state actors. Overall, these attacks caused severe disruption to transdesert traffic, not least during the Great Syrian Revolt. In response to the prevailing insecurity, the Mandate authorities in Syria and Iraq gradually organised and regulated transdesert traffic, introducing measures that provided new impediments to mobility, such as restrictions on traffic days.

In addition to these impediments, the division of the post-Ottoman space into territorial states adversely affected transdesert mobility. To be sure, the new borders did not materialise immediately and were never an impermeable barrier to movement. After all, the post-Ottoman states and, even more so, the Mandate powers, along with the League of Nations had a vested interest in certain regional and transregional flows of goods and people in the mandated territories. However, the introduction of regulations on cross-border mobility, the constitution

of a border infrastructure and the implementation of processes of inclusion and exclusion constrained transdesert movements. Thus, administrative formalities and border checks created considerable delays that hampered the flow of mail, passengers and goods. Moreover, the post-Ottoman states shaped new mobility regimes based on rules and practices to regulate mobility that selectively approved, hindered, and prohibited cross-border movements. The mobility of travellers and migrants across the Syrian Desert thus became contingent on their nationality, socio-economic status, employment situation and sex, but also on the discretionary power of consular officials and border agents. As I have shown in this dissertation, state authorities in Syria and Iraq were unable to control their common border, in its entirety, effectively; however, they developed effective mechanisms to strengthen the monitoring of cross-border mobility, such as the establishment of additional checkpoints, the exchange of intelligence between state officials and police officers, inter-state coordination of refoulement practices as well as the criminalisation of irregular travellers and migrants, smugglers and transport companies carrying undocumented persons.

In the interwar years, the Syrian Desert thus became a zone of intense and varied mobility, which, however, remained inconsistent and uneven. These changes in transdesert mobility had important repercussions for the regions surrounding the Syrian Desert. This dissertation has shown that the development of the Baghdad–Damascus route reinforced the formation of state territories and prompted the interlinked actions of the newly formed post-Ottoman states, while producing regional and transregional interactions, which inscribed territorially bounded spaces into a regional space.

The development of the Baghdad–Damascus route led to the close intertwining of the post-Ottoman states of Iraq and Syria. On the one hand, it fostered sustained, if irregular, efforts at collaboration between officials and administrators in both states, aimed at achieving common goals. Multiple inter-state conferences, the drafting of joint regulations on transdesert traffic, the exchange of information on convoy schedules, intelligence sharing and collaboration in the pursuit of suspected convoy raiders all testify to these efforts in the 1920s and part of the 1930s. The common interests of the French and British Mandate authorities in developing transregional flows of trade and people served as an incentive to overcome the frictions on the ground and the deep rivalry between the two empires. Following Iraq's attainment of independence in the 1930s, these efforts at collaboration continued, given the willingness of police officers and administrators at different levels to keep collaborating, despite the Iraqi government's refusal to deal diplomatically with the French Mandate authorities. On the other hand, the development of the Baghdad–Damascus route generated tensions and competition,

especially—but not only—between the French and British Mandate powers. Key controversies centred on the issue of support for transport contractors and British and Iraqi encouragement of the development of an alternative transdesert route between Haifa and Baghdad. In the 1930s, the rivalry between the promoters of the two transdesert routes transformed the transport sector into a battleground of sorts. Relations between the French and Syrian authorities, on the one hand, and British and Iraqi authorities, on the other hand, deteriorated sharply. Competition, like cooperation, indicates that the states of Syria and Iraq did not develop in isolation; rather, the policies pursued by their respective administrations (whether the Mandate authorities or local governments) were closely interconnected due to the increasing connectivity of their territories.

Furthermore, transdesert mobility played a major role in the formation and consolidation of state territories. The growth of traffic between Damascus and Baghdad prompted the authorities of both countries to develop a border infrastructure and institutions that were continually reshaped over time in response to changes in mobility practices and circumstances in Iraq and Syria. During the interwar period, states strengthened border management in a bid to regulate and streamline but also maintain mobility across the Syrian–Iraqi border. The cholera episode of 1927 testifies to the willingness of the French and British authorities to keep the border open to movement, albeit under tighter control, even in times of crisis. This dissertation has shown that the Syrian–Iraqi border was largely shaped through interactions among authorities pursuing territorial sovereignty and transdesert mobility, thus helping to explain the formation of territorial states in the post-Ottoman Middle East as being more than the outcomes of negotiations and diplomatic treaties. On a different note, increased transdesert connectivity also provoked reactions of state territorialisation. For example, in the 1930s, the Iraqi government strove to keep its wealthy citizens in the country during the summer so they would spend their money in support of the domestic economy.

At the same time, the growing movements of people, goods and mail across the Syrian Desert produced new socio-economic and cultural interactions between regions which, until the twentieth century, were only crossed by 'professional itinerants', pilgrims and occasional travellers.[7] Equally, the many people whose movements were not sanctioned by states, but who managed to slip across the borders, shaped new forms of interaction on a regional scale. In addition, the development of regional tourism, scouting and organised tours for students and

[7] Quote: Nile Green, 'The Road to Kabul: Automobiles and Afghan Internationalism, 1900-40', in Benjamin Hopkins and Magnus Marsden (eds.), *Beyond Swat: History, Society and Economy along the Afghanistan-Pakistan Frontier* (London: Hurst & Company, 2013), p. 90.

government officials created transnational bonds and helped to familiarise people with places that were once known only through old books and hearsay. By travelling and writing about their travels, journalists helped to broaden the conceptual map of people living around the Syrian Desert. The many forms of travel that developed across the Syrian Desert were in some ways formative of a regional space, which was neither homogeneous nor permanent; spanning the Syrian–Iraqi border and overlapping with emerging national bounded spaces, its significance constantly shifted. Similarly, the growing integration of the Baghdad–Damascus route into transregional networks of transport extending from Europe to Central Asia and the Arabian Peninsula reinforced the centrality of the Syrian–Iraqi space on the world stage. The establishment of the Baghdad–Damascus route as a global crossroads drew long-distance flows of people, mail and goods through the Syrian Desert, which once again resulted in a dynamic interplay of de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation.

Throughout the interwar years, the Baghdad–Damascus route served both as a catalyst and disruptor of historical developments that reshaped the territorial and spatial configuration of the areas surrounding the Syrian Desert. Indeed, the formation and development of the Baghdad–Damascus route revealed and also accentuated three sets of tensions: between mobility and immobility, between non-state actors and post-Ottoman states, and between the formation of territorial states and processes of regional and global integration. Put differently, this route produced multifaceted effects on mobility, space and states as well as on the actors involved in the process, generating concord and conflict, cooperation and competition as well as integration and partition.

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